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FANTASTIC

November 1966 Vol. 16, No. 2

THOMAS N. SCORTIA'S NEW NOVELETTE

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"THE LAND OF KU"

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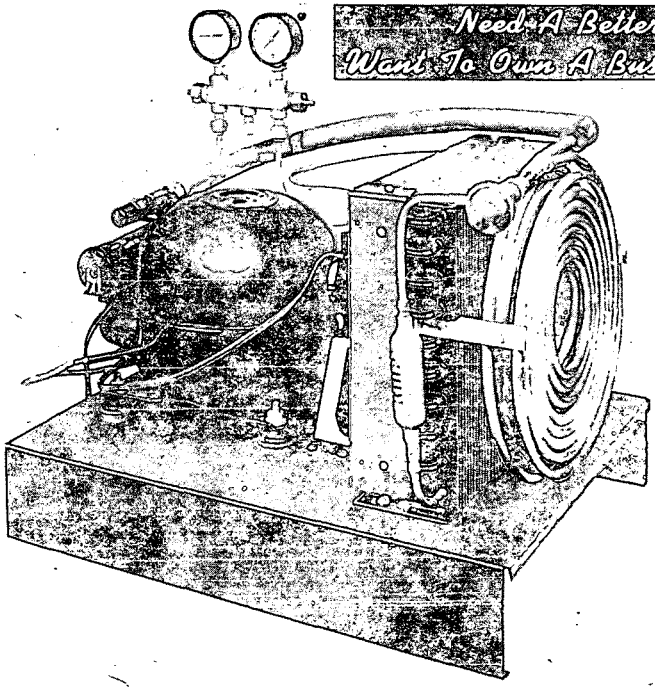

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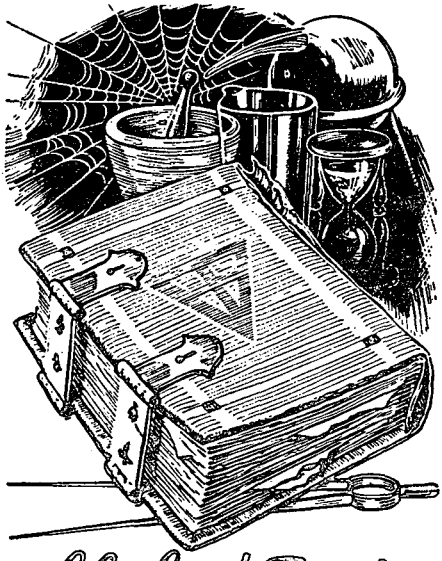

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From Robert A. Heinlein's taboo-breaking "If This Goes On . . ." (1940) to Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s Hugo-winning Canticle for Leibowitz *(1959), science fiction has had its fair share of speculation about religion in times to come—most of it in the novel length, most of it set right here on Earth. In the novelet that follows, however, Thomas N. Scortia takes us to a particularly alien world where two savage races threaten to carry their bloodlust to the stars. That's why Baldur—surgically altered and somno-conditioned—has to descend in a pillar of fire and try to administer a spiritual jolt to creatures so bestial they still can't bear to watch each other eat!*

BROKEN IMAGE

THOMAS N. SCORTIA

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.
"The Waste Land"—T.S. Eliot

WHILE one of the Earth's great starships poised unseen above the perpetual nitric oxide clouds, they landed Baldur in a pillar of fire where his Loaii guides awaited him with worshipful eyes downcast. Que Bok, the elder of the two guides who had been sent by Marina, greeted him; and that night Baldur entered the city after the burning of the profaners at dusk.

An hour before curfew Baldur followed Que Bok and his son-squire, Lok Lor, through the public square of the city which was called Vlek in the harsh Vorstachian tongue. In the center of the market place two iron stakes stood radiating a dull heat from the remains of the charred wood around them.

"Filthy savages," Baldur said softly as he saw the carboned shapes bound to the iron stakes.

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"Don't be rash," a remembered voice whispered in his inner ear. The memory of his hours of somno-conditioning sent a stab of phantom pain through his temple.

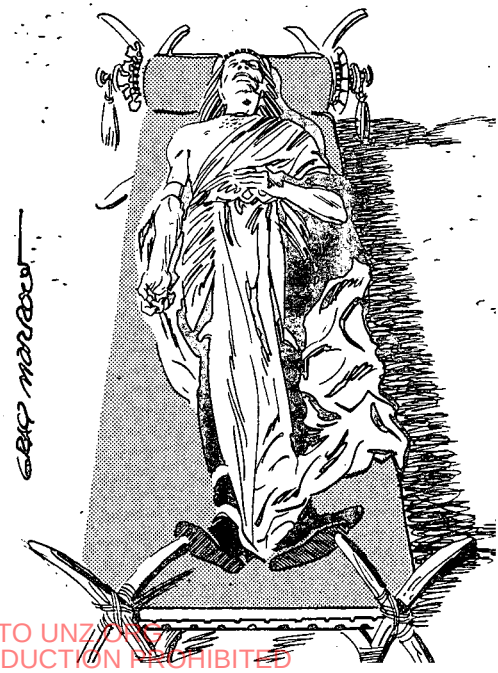
"Please, Lord," Que Bok said softly, his blue-scaled, near-man face mirroring the fear of his slit-pupiled eyes. "The soldiers! It is almost curfew time."

Across the market place, the tangled knot of mercenaries, their brilliant uniforms of red-dyed plummage dulled to the color of venous blood by the approaching dusk, were being mustered by a sergeant wearing a yellow feather headress. The square, Baldur saw, was deserted except for himself, Que Bok, and his son.

Deserted except for them and the withered black things bound by wires to the sooty iron stakes.

"Force is not the answer," the cloud voice seemed to say in his inner ear.

No, he thought, force is not the answer, not to an Earthman. Earthmen could see cruelty, understand it in a dispassionate way, but . . . the subtleties of surgery that had changed him to resemble the Loaii and the Vorstachii had done something else. In the half-remembered pain he must have lost something . . . or gained something. Certainly no Earthman should know the fury that he felt now. Which one of his race, Baldur thought bitterly,



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could feel the cold hate he felt at the sight of the two shriveled things bound to the stakes?

The wood still glowed redly about them, feathering itself into white ash; but the humanoid bodies were quiet in death. Only red sparks still traced the dim memories of agony through the carbonized flesh.

There was no odor. Not any more. The juices had been baked from the two Loaii after the killing heat of the fire, and now only the blackened husks remained with the vague suggestion of the man form, twisted and distorted in the final torture of the flames.

Que Bok tugged at his elbow. "It is almost curfew time. If we are caught in the streets . . ." He left the danger unstated.

Yes, Baldur thought, if they were caught on the streets the swine would kill them with the relish that came to these savage people.

Or they would try, he thought. His hand strayed to the camouflaged equipment belt that looked like a rivet-studded girdle riding low on his hips. The devouring fire that he could call down upon them would seem like the wrath of a vengeful god.

The aftermath would be the sure failure of his mission.

For somehow the path of Loaian and Vorstachian history must be changed before their savage culture came forth from this world centuries from now and brought the old blood lusts back to the stars.

Butchers, he thought, looking at the mercenaries across the square. He could easily burn them down where they stood, make of them the same blackened shriveled things as the two burned Loaii.

A sense of power, of retribution shook him for a moment, and then fear. It was impossible. What was wrong with him?

"So much depends on you," the remembered voice reminded him. "Both the Loaii and the Vorstachii." His mind formed an image of the speaker, distant and idealized. He couldn't identify the man.

"Lead the way," he told Que Bok and gestured for Lok Lor to bring up the rear.

They made their way swiftly through the narrow streets toward the inn where he had been told he would meet Marina. Once Lok Lor said in young wonder, "What cruelties are the Vorstachii not capable of?"

"You're wrong in thinking of them as Vorstachii," Que Bok chided him. "Who is to say what *men* will not do?"

Men? Baldur thought in disgust, creatures like you, men?

In the half-dusk the form of his companions was doubly alien. It was not so much the scaled

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appearance of the Loaii flesh but the placement of the slit-pupiled eyes, the double-whorled flaring of the nostrils, that gave them their exotic appearance. The Vorstachii looked very much like the Loaii except for the double earlobes of the latter and a redder cast to the features. At a distance, both might be taken for Earthmen. Conversely, Earthmen might be taken for Loaii. Otherwise, Baldur thought, his present masquerade, even with Galactic surgical techniques, might have been impossible.

But part of the masquerade, the most important part, was in the way of thinking. And here, he thought with a trace of horror, the surgeons might have succeeded too well. The endless hours of somno-conditioning had blotted out whole areas of his previous memory, superimposing a synthetic history of birth and growth and . . . fury. Anger. Hate. Emotions lost except to the ancestral memory of man.

In the distant past of his race, there had been savageries and cruelties to rival those of the Vorstachii. How long ago? But what Earthman was capable of the sort of hatred and violence, the will to destruction that had moved him this past hour?

The inn was called "The Sign of the Verklu", and the fiber board swinging before it bore an inlaid representation of the ravenous little desert lizard after which it had been named. The inn was set well back from the cobbled cul-de-sac plaza which lay at the end of the street they had taken. It was typical of the buildings in the Loaian quarter, roughly hexagonal, and jutting out into the street to allow a bay window exposure onto the thoroughfare. The rooms for private functions, such as eating, were situated along the outer wall; while the lathe-roofed open courtyard was given over to the living, sleeping, and conversation areas.

They entered and Que Bok greeted the twin inkeepers who saluted Baldur reverently. "Our home is honored," they intoned in unison, and Baldur inclined his head.

"Perhaps you would like a room away from our eyes to eat," one suggested.

The surgeons could not adapt his system to assimilate the alien amino acids of the flesh on this planet. For this reason he carried concentrated packages of a sustaining diet, essential acids, fats, and carbohydrates with needed vitamins. They represented only eighteen hundred calories for a day; but Baldur was accustomed to eating only one meal a day. On eighteen hundred calories his frame stayed lean, but he retained the energy he needed for the strenuous tasks ahead. As a part of his image,

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they had decided to conceal his eating, especially since the Loaii and Vorstachii held special taboos about ingestion and elimination, ranking one with the other. For this reason, a being who did not eat was something quite apart and invested with a special immaculateness not found with ordinary beings.

"I do not eat," Baldur said, and was rewarded with a quick sucking of breath as the innkeepers fell back a step in surprise.

"You mean you have not eaten," one suggested.

"No," Baldur said. "I do not eat."

"Forgive them," Que Bok said. "Had they seen you as I have seen you, they would know."

"Take me to the one I came to see," Baldur said.

"Through the garden, Lord," the second innkeeper said, bowing and turning to lead the way.

They passed through a stand of yellow-green reedy plants and past an irregular grouping of white pebbles which had apparently been selected with a mathematician's eye to regularity of form and similarity of dimension. The effect of a bed of such regular stones was at once irritating in the conflict of uniformity with surrounding assymetry, and exciting. They passed into the sleeping area which stood under the lathe-striped starless sky. Here, in rising terraces, amid stands of reeds and low bushes, the sleeping hammocks of the inn's guests ringed a center stretch of yellow flint sand where small groups gathered in the traditional pose of Loaian conversationalists.

They moved past groups which suddenly broke their selfcontained reserve and bowed before Baldur. It was then he saw her standing on the far side of the sandy stretch. He could not identify the face, but the air of disassociation told him. It must be Marina, he thought, and a quick excitement caused him to lengthen his step.

She smiled and stepped toward him. When he did not speak immediately she said with a puzzled frown, "Baldur?"

"Yes," he said.

"For a moment I thought you didn't recognize me."

"I don't," he said.

"Surely, I'm not that much different?"

"I . . ." he bit his lip and said, "I don't know. I'm a little confused."

"I see," she said nodding her head. "Well, there's no real cause for alarm." She turned to Que Bok and his son. "Will you leave us for a moment?"

The two nodded and withdrew several paces to assume a nonlistening stance.

"I have made arrangements

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for you to stay here tonight. I suppose you don't sleep."

"No," he said. "I haven't tried going without sleep for more than two days so far, but the treatment seems effective."

"It was appropriate to the image."

"Like not eating?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Of course, the eating has a special significance. You know about eating?"

He nodded. "In many ways they are still animals."

"Get that out of your mind," she said. "They're different; another evolutionary stream, but they are men."

"Men?" he said with some distaste. "No, they're not men. They may think and speak and walk on two legs, but they aren't men. They don't belong to our race."

His vehemence surprised him. She looked at him searchingly for a long moment as though debating the meaning of his words.

"You know better than that," she said. "Being a man is not a business of form, or walking on two legs, or speaking, or anything like that. It's a state of mind, an attitude toward the universe and toward life itself."

"Which is just what I meant," he said; and he told her of the evening burning in the square.

"Do you suppose men have always been what they are?" she demanded.

"You can't equate men with these beasts," he said. "Men haven't the capacity for such cruelty or rage or self-pride."

"You think strictly in terms of the race that evolved on Earth," she said; "but there are races that walk on four legs which we call men. As for this quality you call self-pride, have you examined yourself?"

He was taken aback by her sudden turning of his words against him. He was about to say something when Que Bok approached breathlessly and said,

"Lord?"

"Yes," he said.

"There is trouble. Can you help?"

"What is it?" he said.

"One of the men in the eating room. He has the falling sickness and . . ." he waved his hands in a helpless gesture.

"Come with me," Baldur told Marina.

"In the eating room?" Marina said. "That's the greatest taboo . . ."

"Never mind," Baldur snapped. "This is part of why we came and taboos don't stop us."

He followed Que Bok as the Loaii half-trotted across the clearing toward the front of the hostelry. Marina followed uncertainly. Baldur smiled to himself. For all of her certainty, she betrayed the vascillation of every woman.

A small group of Loaii, including the two innkeepers, had

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gathered before the entrance to the room, but no one had dared enter. Through the thin wall Baldur heard soft groaning.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"No one will enter," Que Bok said.

"He is very ill, Lord," Que Bok's son-squire said, "but no one can stand to enter."

"Will you come with me?" Baldur asked.

The young Loai hesitated, looked at the wide-eyed face of his father, and finally nodded. "Where you go, Lord," he said.

Baldur pushed past the group. Inside, the windowless room was long and narrow, barely six feet by nine feet. The yellow light of a shuttered oil lamp affixed to one wall filled the room with long ungainly shadows. The sprawled form of an old Loai quivered on the floor, and Baldur heard him groan in deep pain. He looked around.

The room was sickening.

It was spattered with blood and shreds of purple flesh that clung like dirty mud to the walls and even to the ceiling. The gelatinous flesh which had but minutes before been a moving, breathing lizard-like creature was already in the advanced stages of autolysis. The room reeked of ammonia and decay.

Baldur felt his gorge rise at the smell and he thought for a moment he would lose control of himself. Behind him Que Bok's son made gagging noises and stumbled in the half-light as he fell back.

"Oh, Lord, Lord," the boy said. "Forgive me, Lord." He turned and fled from the horror of the room.

Marina gasped. "It's something I can't get used to, this need of theirs for live food and the way they must kill it."

"The tissues de-aminate too fast for anything else," he said. "Meat an hour old is poison to them."

He looked around the room, seeing the sickening mark of the beast in every corner, and turned his attention to the stricken Loai on the floor.

"And you call these 'men'," he said contemptuously.

Marina removed a communicator from somewhere within her robes and spoke softly into it. He conducted a swift examination of the native, and relayed her information. At a distance he heard the vicious crackle of static as the answering beam from the ship penetrated the massive plasma layers of the planetary ionosphere—the plasma layers which constantly renewed the opaque blanket of poisonous nitric-oxide that formed the yellow brown sky above them.

He removed an instrument from his equipment belt, made several checks which included oxygen-

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balance and amino acid level in the blood stream. He gave several bits of data to Marina who transmitted them to the waiting ship. In moments he had the answer and began the pencil-beam surgery at the base of the patient's skull. It was little more than refined trepanning, but the effect was that of relieving the constricting pressure around the major artery that supplied the brain. In seconds the patient's breathing became normal and he subsided into a deep sleep that Baldur saw was the normal reaction to heavy fatigue.

He rose and replaced the pencil beam. "That's enough for the moment," he said. "They can handle the rest."

"It won't be the last time you do this," she said.

He smiled sourly. "Divine healer to a bunch of savages. I appreciate the irony."

Outside, Baldur instructed the twin innkeepers to remove the sleeping native. The two innkeepers, who had been trained from infancy in their craft, entered while the other Loaii turned to their hammocks strung around the sleeping area. Baldur motioned to Marina to leave the area.

Before she retired she said, "Tomorrow we will go into the city."

"That's bound to be dangerous," he said.

"Of course, but that's part of the mission."

"Do you really think we can influence a whole culture this way?" he asked.

"By creating a legend? A new religion? Look at the history of the Earth."

"I don't know," Baldur said. "To introduce an idea as alien as the brotherhood of Loaii and Vorstachii—neither race will tolerate the idea."

"The time will come when the Loaii will throw off the control of the Vorstachii and the whole pattern will repeat itself," she said. "By the time they develop an advanced technology and space flight they will be little more than savages with atomic power. We can't turn such a race loose in the universe without some governing control. In the end we would have to destroy them, and that is something men will not face unless they have to."

"It's hard to believe these things could come to the level of morality and respect for life that men have achieved," he said. "It's a sad beginning."

"But it *is* a beginning," she pointed out.

He left her and returned to his own area. He could not sleep, and he envied her that ability. Of course, she had no image to preserve. Playing the half-divine prophet to a savage planet re-

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quired a constant attention to the correct image as well as a close understanding of the underlying psychology of the races.

After an hour he grew restless and decided to get some air. He was moving out into the sand area at the center of the inn when he realized his path would take him past her secluded hammock. He paused near the reed screen that separated her area and wondered if she were awake. Then he heard voices speaking low and insistently. He tried to make out the words.

"Yes . . . yes, of course," she was saying. "Only I don't understand your attitude. Are you sure he has enough information?"

She was speaking into the communicator, he realized.

"Surely he must realize," she was saying. "I know it's a shock. All transitions are, but . . ."

The rest of the conversation was lost to him.

He started, wondering whom she was addressing. Someone on the ship, obviously. He closed his eyes and sought a face, and realized that there was no face to be sought. Just a general man-face, refined and delicate, and turned with a sensitive, almost idealized hand so that the nobility of the face was completely devoid of humanity. For a moment he shuddered at the loss and then thought of names . . .

Miller, Nakano, Ibn Alli, a dozen more . . . all names he knew; but the faces wouldn't come. Men faces as different from his Loaian face as the faces of lower animals were different. Only the idealized face came and, of course, the subtly changed face of Marina with odd brown eyes, deep, liquid, and full of some inner meaning that were alien to the face she wore at the moment. When she had been something else . . .

Human. To lose one's humanity. It was a traumatic enough experience, he realized. Little cause for alarm—the disorientation—but he was suddenly very afraid and he knew he did not dare admit it. He itemized himself, past memories of family, parents, childhood—well, it was all there and secure, and he knew who he was.

He walked past Marina's area into the arena and sat through most of the night looking into the sky, seeking for the impossible glimpse of a star in a sky that had never parted its cloud layer enough to show even the primary around which it orbited.

He ate his single daily meal secretly before anyone awoke and was sitting staring out into the recreation area when Que Bok, looking still sleepy, appeared and approached him.

"Lord, what will you do today?" he asked.

"I will go among the people today," Baldur said.

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"Perhaps I should assemble a group," Que Bok suggested.

"No, we'll go to the market place," Baldur said.

"That is not safe, Lord. The governor's troops are all over the city, and even the City Lord cannot control them."

"Nevertheless, we will go to the market place," Baldur said. "Pass the word that I will be there before noon."

After Que Bok had left, Baldur prepared himself, checking out the equipment he had brought with him. He paid particular attention to the resonator. The men in the ship had warned him against any show of violence on this violent world. The resonator would handle most situations, he knew, by the subtonic radiation effect on the local nervous system. The product was an unreasoning fear in the victim, the sort of consuming fear that would cause him to forget any idea of violence. The opaque projector was another item. In those instances where he needed to obscure the area where he worked, the projector would surround him with an opaque sphere which could be extended, with some loss in opaqueness, to as much as twenty yards.

When Marina appeared, he was ready for the journey to the center of the city. The yellow light from the dirty brown sky brought an unreal cast to her alien features.

"What we do today is doubly important," she said. "It establishes the pattern of the mission, and your first appearance will leave its mark upon the history of these people."

"I hope things go as planned," he said. "The concept is somewhat mystical for my tastes."

"Mystical?" she said. "Of course, it's mystical. How else do you leave a lasting historical imprint upon a primitive people? How do you introduce a new morality and a brotherhood concept on a planet with master and slave races so completely set apart from each other?"

"By developing a slave religion?" he asked.

"Slave religions have a vigor, historically, that the religions of dominant races never have. The masters grow soft in their religion. They don't need it to sustain their self-image or to promise them a better day."

"I don't challenge your reasoning," he said. "After all, I *am* here."

"Yes," she said, "you are."

"A man can't do more than that," he said.

"No," she said. "You can't ask more of a man."

She smiled at him in a half-distracted fashion as though not knowing what to say beyond this. He was rather surprised to see

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that even in the alien disguise of the Loaii she was attractive. He had memories of knowing her before, but he was confused; and his first thought was that he had best beware of the effect of isolation and danger. Men tended to commit themselves emotionally under those circumstances, and he knew this was not a good thing for him. Nevertheless, he thought, she was quite attractive in a completely foreign and unhuman fashion.

He thought of confronting her with the conversation he had overheard, but he realized that he had little to go on. Undoubtedly the men in the ship had given her instructions beyond those given him. He decided he would look foolish if he made an issue of it.

Just before midday they left the inn and proceeded along the narrow streets toward the marketplace. As they walked, several natives attached themselves to the group; and shortly a small line of Loaii followed Baldur, Marina, and Que Bok down the narrow street. Lok Lor lagged somewhat behind as the followers tugged at his robes and bombarded him with questions.

They entered the market place, and Baldur paused before the iron stakes which had held the bodies of the two Loaii. He stood for a long moment in silence, counting the effect of his action upon the audience. A wave of whispering swept the fringe of the group as more Loaii joined the crowd, and a few passing Vorstachii stopped and stood arrogantly on the edge of the crowd. He looked about, but there were only isolated spots of red as yet to signify the presence of the city mercenaries.

An old woman came forward, trembling, and said, "Lord, Lord, help me!"

Her eyes, Baldur saw, were clouded with the beginning haze of cataracts. She must be barely able to navigate, he thought, with even large masses in bright light being featureless to her clouded eyes. He leaned forward and cupped her head in his hand. They were prepared for this as well as a hundred other rather common afflictions. His hand moved, found the instrument he needed. He adjusted it by touch and moved it over her eyes, dissolving away the opaque tissue and stimulating new growth about the cornea. As he watched, the cloudiness disappeared and her eyes became bright and shining.

The woman gasped at the sudden impact of light. She fell to her knees and kissed the hem of his robe. Finally he pulled her to her feet. A low murmur of wonder ran through the crowd as she turned and they saw the miracle he had accomplished.

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The word spread quickly of his coming. In the next hour the sick and lame ones appeared from the crowd and he healed them. In some instances he allayed the illness in a matter of minutes with an irradiation that destroyed the microorganisms of the disease. The minor surgeries he performed under the crowd's watchful eyes and heard their gasps of wonder. He looked up at last at Marina's whispered warning and saw a group of red-plumed mercenaries converging on them.

"Careful," she said. "Don't make any overt move."

He nodded.

The mercenaries, under the direction of their captains, began to clear the people. A low murmur of disappointment swept through the crowd. Several of the Loaii resisted briefly; the soldiers struck them down with their glass-barbed maces.

"Wait!" he shouted, and raised his hand.

In an instant silence held the crowd. The mercenaries stopped in their tracks. A tickling sensation in his middle ear told him that Marina was using the resonator subtonics which were peculiarly effective on the Vorstachii. The Loaii appeared uncomfortable, but the Vorstachii mercenaries were frozen in a mixture of terror and awe.

He spoke to them then, pitching his voice persuasively, then

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insistently, talking to them of their destiny as a race. For the Loaii and the Vorstachii, he said, were mere varieties from the same racial stock; and the hatred and mistrust of generations had to end before they would inherit the skies above and the stars that the legends told of. All men were of the same womb, and not the least of these were the Loaii and the Vorstachii.

The Loaii rustled in their robes, horrified at the audacity of the words. The grip of hatred was centuries old, and the oppressed perpetuated their oppression as much as the oppressors by their attitudes and their generations-old desire for revenge.

But he talked to them of that too, seeing that they would reject the words at first. Only he knew that some would hear and remember, and that the words would be seeds that would bear fruit generations from now. It was the only way to turn them from this jungle hate to meet the beings that men had become.

In the end, he stopped, tired and vaguely depressed. It had not gone as he had hoped. The baffled eyes and the whispering voices from the crowd told him this.

Lok Lor tugged at his elbow and said, "My father says we must go."

He nodded absently and took Marina by the arm. As they moved through the crowd, someone shouted, and a ripe fruit flew through the air to land at his feet. Moments later stones were falling from the rear.

Que Bok appeared beside him and said, "Hurry, Lord."

The crowd was closing in on them when Marina loosed her control of the mercenaries. The immediate effect was a sudden surge away from the square as the soldiers moved forward, their jagged maces slashing down on the Loaii. He heard screaming, and in seconds the crowd broke into a confused mass of bodies stumbling in all directions. In this confusion, Que Bok led them down an alley, doubled their path back behind a row of buildings, and soon they were in the sanctuary of the inn.

"A terrible thing, Lord," he said when they were seated in the inn garden.

"We'll try again tomorrow," he said.

"I fear it will be the same, Lord," Lok Lor said.

"Only the City Lord will loose the governor's troops upon us."

"I have a plan for that," Marina said.

"What's that?" Baldur asked.

"I'll talk with you about it later," she said, "after I have discussed it with the others."

He nodded absently. The fatigue and discouragement of the day weighted his mind more than

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he had realized. For the first time he wondered at the rationale of his mission. Was it enough, this business of performing a few apparent miracles and leaving a message of brotherhood to these savages? Would this be sufficient impetus for their ponderous historical process to be turned in a new direction?

It must be, he thought. It seemed a simple and real plan.

Only he had not realized, on an immediate personal level, just how savage these people were. The whole atmosphere of their society was so alien to men who had rid themselves of these emotions long ago. That the long historical process would eventually raise these beasts to that level was something he could not imagine. But men had changed other races more alien than these, he knew.

Somewhat later that evening when he sought Marina, Que Bok told him she had left the inn with Lok Lor.

"Where did she go?" he demanded.

"I do not know, Lord," Que Bok said.

"Did she give any hint?"

The old Loai thought for a moment. "She asked many questions about the governor and about the City Lord. I did not understand her intent."

She returned with Lok Lor just before dawn. He watched her move across the sandy arena and rose before her.

"Oh!" she said, "You gave me a start."

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"Out," she said. "I had an idea that might help."

"What right have you to try something without consulting me?" he demanded angrily. "Don't you know what kind of a world you're on?"

"Of course," she said, and brushed his cheek with her lean fingers. They made a faint burring sound, slipping across his scaled flesh. "I had no idea you would be so disturbed."

"It's foolhardy," he said, feeling flushed. "What have you done?"

"I have been finding out what I can of the City Lord. If we are to continue, we must gain some support from the local power structure."

"That's not an easy task," he said.

"The City Lord is noted for being more liberal than most of his race," she said. "He's known among the Vorstachii as a poet. Isn't that odd?"

"I can imagine the poetry these savages would write," he said sourly.

"You're too arrogant," she said. "Within their own framework, the Vorstachii have a well-developed morality. They have

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strong family ties, and they can be gentle and kind to their own."

"I'm deeply touched," he said. "How can we possibly use all of this, however?"

"The City Lord has only the power ceded to him by the governor; and there has been so much unrest in the city recently that the governor's troops which have been sent here act almost semi-autonomously. Nevertheless, the City Lord is the nearest source of power we can touch."

"I still don't see how."

"He has a young son," she said. "If we can get to him through the son . . ."

"You're beginning to think like these animals," he said turning away.

"Let's not quarrel," she said. "There's too much to do, and so much depends on us."

Before he could answer, her lips brushed his forehead in the dusk, and she said, "Please, Baldur, not tonight. You'll feel better tomorrow morning."

"You forget," he said bitterly, "I don't sleep." It was, he realized, the worst part of the changes that had been made in him.

He sat the remainder of the night thinking of her and the contradictions of her. He remembered her only as a face amid the past memories; and he wondered if, amid the confused memories, real and synthetic, she occupied more than a shadow part. The terrible thing, he realized, was that he no longer trusted her. It was obvious that the men in the ship had given her instructions he knew nothing about.

Shortly after dawn he was started from his reverie by a loud banging at the street entrance. After some moments he heard the querulous tones of one of the innkeepers. An instant later a harsh crash sounded and a squad of mercenaries boiled into the inn arena. Two of them held the innkeeper captive; when he struggled, one soldier struck him with a short club and hurled him carelessly to the ground.

"What are you doing?" Baldur demanded angrily.

"Are you the magician?" the captain of the troop demanded.

"I am Bal Dur," he said, giving it the Loaian pronunciation.

"You are to come with us," the man said.

"Lord, Lord," Que Bok said, appearing from the sleeping area followed by Marina.

"Keep away," he ordered Que Bok. "It can mean only trouble for you."

"Come," the captain said. He motioned two of the soldiers forward.

Marina appeared by Baldur's side. "I'm coming too."

"You can't," he said. "It's dangerous."

"I have to come," she said. "It's part of the plan."

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"No," he said. "I don't know what you and the men on the ship are up to, but it's too dangerous."

"Nevertheless, I'm coming," she said, and moved toward the soldiers. Two of them took her arms as the first pair seized Baldur. He brushed them aside.

"Who wants me?" he demanded.

"The Lord of the City," the captain said, "though why he wants to talk with such vermin is beyond me."

"The woman comes too," Baldur said.

"Very well," the captain said. "There are dungeons enough."

He signaled and the troop formed around them. They left the inn and proceeded slowly north toward the City Lord's palace.

They entered a side gate obscured from the desert garden of the main entrance by an outcropping of porous rock which must have been carted intact from the volcanic regions to the south. A squeeking portcullis lowered behind them after they entered. They were led past the bivouac area of at least a hundred mercenaries. Finally they entered a formal garden of rock and sand. Feathery desert plants reared forty feet above them on thin porous stalks, while their tendrils swept down in an airy screen that filled the air with diaphanous fronds. The fronds were scaled with microscpoic transparent scales that caught the yellow morning light and turned the garden into a dizzying lake of flashing rainbow colors extending into near infrared. The guards withdrew leaving them alone.

After a moment a form appeared at the other end of the garden and approached. The Vorstachi was barely five feet tall, small and delicate for his race. Part of his loss in height, Baldur saw, stemmed from his bowed, almost stooped posture as he walked. He looked very tired and worn.

"I am Gar Lan, the Lord of the Vlek," he said tiredly looking first at Marina and then at Baldur. "You are the one they call the magician?"

"Your troops call me a magician, perhaps," Baldur said.

"Teacher, then. You call yourself a teacher," the Lord said impatiently.

"Yes," Baldur said.

"You talk nonsense in the city streets about great beings beyond the stars which most men have never seen, and how one day we will walk by their sides as equals."

"That is so," Baldur said.

"They say that you are probably a god."

"I have never said this," Baldur said.

"Perhaps a child of gods?"

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"You have said it," Baldur said, "Not I."

"No matter," the Lord said. "You have performed miracles, they tell me, healed people in the streets of diseases and cured deformities that no doctors of ours could help."

"He can do this," Marina said. "He can cast out disease, and cause the crippled to walk, and raise the spirit at the point of death."

Baldur looked at her, trying to tell her not to overplay.

"Is this true?" the City Lord demanded.

"It is true, Gar Lan," Baldur said.

"I am addressed as Lord," the man snapped.

"I address no one as Lord," Baldur said.

The man stared at him, weighing his audacity. Baldur paused, expecting him to call the guard Then he realized that the tenor of the man's questions meant that he needed help.

"There is someone who is ill?" Baldur said.

"My son," the Lord said. "My only son."

"Very well," Baldur said. "I will see him."

The Lord led them through the garden, brushing aside the prismatic fronds. They passed over an airy bridge of woven basket work and through a massive door whose posts were demons carved from the trunks of two great trees to an inner sleeping garden. On a low couch at the end of the garden the still form of a boy lay surrounded by a group of figures.

As they approached, one Vorstachi turned to meet them. He wore the robes of a physician.

"Lord," he said, "we tried our best."

"What do you mean?" the Lord demanded.

"He is with his grandfathers," the physician said.

Gar Lan forgot his dignity and ran to his son's couch. He fell to his knees before the silent form and gathered it in his arms. After a moment his figure sagged and he lowered the boy to the couch. He gestured for the attendants to withdraw and turned to Baldur.

"He is surely dead," he said in a broken voice.

"I am truly sorry to hear this," Baldur said.

"Only you can help," the Lord said. When Baldur said nothing, the Lord insisted, "You can raise the very dead. You woman said so."

"Let me look at the boy," Baldur said.

The Lord stood aside and he approached the couch. There was no question of it; the boy was dead. The signs of autolysis were already present, and he knew that the tissues of the body were

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being reduced by the body's own uncontrolled enzymes. Such a thing happened to Earth animals after death, Baldur knew, but the process was one of hours and even days. In the Vorstachii and Loaii, and indeed in all of the higher animals of this world, the autolysis that followed death in an hour softened tissues and broke proteins into a half-liquid mass in which bacteria grew quickly. If the boy were not cremated before the sun set, his body would be a mass of corruption and dangerous infection by tomorrow morning.

He leaned forward, checking the clenched condition of the limbs, and the odor struck him. He sniffed, smelling the characteristic banana oil odor. Then he saw the prominent reddish coloration in the veins of the neck, and he knew.

"Marina," he said.

As soon as she was beside him he said, "Gar Lan, we will leave you for a moment," and erected the shield before the Lord could answer.

"Neural toxin," he said. "The boy's been poisoned."

"Of course," she said.

"They know nothing about such toxins," he said.

"I know this," she said. "I poisoned him."

He grabbed her arm fiercely and turned her to face him. "What are you saying?" he said.

"I bribed a servant to poison the boy," she said.

"You thought I could save him and buy his father's gratitude?" he said. "How could you, and with the toxin? You know it's fatal to these people."

"I intended that he should die," she said. "Otherwise, the effect would not have been the same."

"My God!" he said. "What are you saying?"

"We don't have too much time," she said. "We must work fast."

"He's dead, don't you understand?" Baldur said. "We can do nothing for him."

"I told you I was prepared for this," she said removing her communicator. "We're ready," she said into it.

The milk-white sphere that had formed about them as Baldur raised the screen glowed brightly for a moment, and before them the body on the couch shimmered and disappeared.

"The same way you and I were brought here," she said. "They have already recorded the general structure of his body, and the body they have removed will provide the refinements. Then the nervous system pattern will be duplicated."

"Make a duplicate of the boy?" he said. "A robot?"

"Not a robot. A flesh and blood, living duplicate with a brain and nervous system, the exact du-

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plicate of the boy with full memory up to death."

"But not the boy himself."

"Who's to say?" she said. "It's as if we removed five minutes of him in time and then returned his body intact. Can you say that he is dead, that what we return is not the boy himself?"

Before he could reply, the couch glowed brightly and the figure of the boy reassembled itself. Only now, the young limbs were flushed with life, and the chest moved while the whorled nostrils moved, sucking in the life-giving air.

"Drop the screen," Marina said. He obeyed without thinking.

Gar Lan stood outside, his eyes wide with fear. At the sight of his son, he forgot them and ran forward to fall beside the couch. His chest heaved silently.

Finally, he looked up at Baldur with wonder and said, "He's alive."

"Yes," Baldur said. "He is now alive."

The City Lord rose slowly, looked at Baldur for long moments. Finally, he sank to his knees and clutched the hem of Baldur's robe.

"Lord," he said. "I know you for what you are. Ask anything of me."

Baldur barely heard him. He was looking at Marina with horror.

Men were not cruel, he told himself. Not like this. What man could have approached the solution to their political problem so cold-bloodedly?

She must be insane, he thought. He felt empty and alone at the thought. He realized suddenly that he loved her, and that she must be lost to him forever after this. The thought did not occur to him until much later in the quarters the City Lord had provided for him that if she were mad, the men in the ship above the clouds were equally mad.

For they had helped her.

In a city where he had been a member of an enslaved race, Baldur, in the days that followed, found himself honored and a guest of the Lord of the City. Although the governor's troops were in the city. Gar Lan's word was still absolute, and no Vorstachi dared challenge Baldur in his new favor. With the City Lord's full protection he went out on the streets and spoke to the people, both Vorstachii and Loaii, and they brought their sick to him to be healed. At first only the Loaii came, but the story of the miraculous resurrection of the Lord's son spread and soon the Vorstachii themselves came.

It was not his intention to humble that proud race; but when some of the Vorstachii nobles sent for him he refused to come, and they had to bring their illnesses to him. The ones who had

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only minor complaints stayed away and nursed their affront and promised themselves that they would eventually have the skin of the upstart slave.

He had little time to think because of his schedule. This was as he wished for he could not forget the chain of events that had led to this freedom. He saw Marina frequently and she was cheerful, full of life and excitement; but he saw her assume a tainted image, touched with the stain of her inhuman opportunism.

When he spoke in the streets of the destiny of the two races, there were grumblings, not only from the Vorstachii but from the Loaii. The undercurrent of hatred had not abated by their common need for his help, and he despaired of the success of their mission. Something more was needed, he realized. Healing and miraculous cures appealed to their primitive view of the universe which they peopled with demons and spirits and gods. They had the basically mystic bent of primitives, and he could not reach them with the altruism of the message, try as he might. He needed some mystical symbol of the message, he knew, some magical demonstration of the truth of his words. That he was from some god or gods, they accepted. That he was from a great race of men who would one day meet the two races outside the eternal sky, they rejected. As proud as they were, both races needed something before which they could abase themselves.

In the end, he knew that without this symbol, he would fail, and all of the planning and all of the pain would have been to no avail. In the end, when the Loaii and the Verstachii came forth to meet men, they would came as savages and warriors; and the bloodlust they carried would bring their own destruction. It was inconsistent with what he knew and believed, but he saw now that man would destroy them. The failure of his mission would mean the failure of the image he carried of his race, the race of Earthmen who had long ago cast off all savagery and who had raised other races to rule the universe with them.

When he tried to talk to Marina about his doubts, she smiled and assured him that everything was going well. He realized then how alienated they had become, how completely he had withdrawn from her. He felt alone and deserted in a hostile world.

The day the governor finally moved he almost welcomed the end of thought and helplessness and the beginning of movement, of action of any kind, however futile.

Gar Lan came to him in the afternoon and said, "Lord, some of my nobles have carried tales to the governor, and he is coming

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on this very same afternoon."

"What does this mean?" Baldur asked.

"I will have no power to stop him. If he finds you, he will have you burned in the square."

"Very well," Baldur said, "I must leave. I thank you for your hospitality."

"You understand, Lord," Gar Lan persisted, "if he captures you, I cannot help you."

"I would not ask you to," Baldur said. "Your first duty is to save yourself and your son."

"Thank you, Lord," the man said.

Shortly thereafter, Lok Lor and Que Bok came. He met them at the north wall entrance.

"I shall have to go into hiding," he said.

"It is all arranged," Que Bok said.

As soon as Marina had joined them, they set out fro a shop near the city wall. There, the proprietor, a friend of Que Bok received them.

"Lord, I am honored," he said.

The quarters were cramped, and Baldur spent the night feeling restless and trapped.

In the morning they heard that the governor had entered the city and had taken command of the City Lord's palace. Later that day stories came to them of red-plumed mercenaries roaming through the city, dispersing Loaii and Vorstachii alike when they gathered in groups of more than three. Repeatedly came stories of mercenary soldiers attacking groups of Loaii and clubbing them. Later they heard that the mercenaries had drawn swords, and many Loaii were killed in the side streets when they met mercenaries.

That afternoon, the governor offered a reward for Baldur.

"Lord, I am afraid," Que Bok said.

"Why?" Baldur asked.

"It is a very large reward," Que Bok said.

That evening Marina said, "Things are coming rapidly to a head."

"There's no point in my staying further," Baldur said. "Call the ship and ask them to return us."

"Not yet," she said.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Orders," she said.

He thought of those unknown men in the ship above the clouds and he wondered what they were planning. Surely he had done all he could. There was no further purpose to be served in waiting out the search in this shop. His mission, he realized, must be a dismal failure. In one generation, the story of his visit would be a mere legend; in two generations, it would be a fairy tale to tell children. Nothing had been accomplished, he saw, but the local confusion of authority and the

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temporary dissolving of some of the barriers that separated slave and master.

At night Marina returned with Lok Lor and he said, "Call the ship."

"No," she said. "It is not time."

"All over the city they are slaughtering Loaii. Isn't that enough for you? We talk of men and altruism and how men are beyond this savagery. Yet look what we have done."

"Baldur," she said tiredly, "you're the only one who talks of men and their being beyond this savagery. Men are, after all, only men, and they must be what they are."

He felt a sense of impending disaster in her words. They smacked almost of blasphemy. "No," he said. "Men have risen beyond this."

"Men are no better and no worse than a hundred other races," she said, "but they are strong, and that is what counts. Remember, it was men who dreamed of something higher than the mud and found something greater than mere living and dying. It was men who came out of the caves and built cities and empires and found morality in the midst of savagery. It was men who built the ships that brought us here, men as they are and not as you imagine them."

"No," he said, "our race is not like that. I know it."

"Perhaps our race is not like that," Marina said softly, "but then for all our love of men and long companionship with them from the earliest days, we are not of the race of men."

He felt ill at her words. He could not accept the idea. To be less than what he was, some fawning creature that man had given sentience to with careless largess . . .

"Don't tell me this fairy tale," he said scornfully. "I have memories."

"Yes," she said, "and for the moment it was important that these be incomplete, but it was not their intent that you forget who you are."

"I am a man," he said, "and that's all that matters." Then he called Lok Lor and said, "Hurry, we are leaving."

"Where to, Lord?"

"I don't know," he said. "Just away. Somewhere away where we can hide."

They left the shop and stepped into the night. The mercenaries were waiting for him. They closed about him and when Lok Lor tried to fight, they struck him down. He heard Marina cry out as the blow fell, and he turned, looking for her. He saw her standing with the captain of the squad. It was then he realized she had brought the soldiers.

They carried him away to the

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dungeon in the wall of the palace, and the next day he was brought before Gar Lan who sat at the feet of the governor.

"Is this the traitor and blasphemer?" the governor demanded.

"This is Bal Dur," the City Lord said, his eyes filled with sorrow.

"Are you, as you say, the son of gods?" the governor said.

"I am the son of men," Baldur said looking at the governor through a haze that covered his eyes, "and men are gods," he said.

"That's enough," the governor said. "Burn him."

The governor's sedan chair preceded them while the City Lord walked on foot near him. He was dragged in heavy bonds from the palace through the streets while the crowds on both sides wept and jeered. As they entered the market place, he saw Marina and pulled away from his guards.

"Why? Why?" he demanded.

"Don't you see?" she said. "It wasn't enough. They needed a symbol of faith for both races, someone to expiate their hate. It's one of the most potent survival forces for a religion—the hanged god concept. Only we couldn't let you know all the details. It was too much to ask of you . . ."

"Too much!" he cried, overwhelmed with the realization of what they had planned. The guards pulled him back then and he saw the stake in the market place before him.

The horror of what awaited him came to him then and the still greater horror of what the monsters he called men had planned for him: To be sent down to some obscure planet for one purpose, to be put to death so that an insane legend of a god made flesh would last through history.

The cruelty of men was beyond belief.

They bound him to the stake and stacked wood about him. The governor rose from his chair and made a sign.

"Let the law take its sentence," Gar Lan said sorrowfully. He came forward and wiped his hand upon the hem of Baldur's robe.

"I tried to stop it, Lord," he whispered. "What can I do?"

"Remember all I told you," Baldur said. "At least remember all I taught you."

The man's hands quivered with emotion and he dropped the hem. "We won't forget you," he whispered. "Loaii and Vorstachii, we'll always remember."

Rage surged suddenly in Baldur's body. You dirty little poet savage, he thought. Burn me and get it over with.

He looked out over the market place at the silent crowds, the flushed faces of the soldiers, the tight knot of Loaii at the far end.

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In the midst of the men he saw Que Bok. The eyes were fierce, and he suddenly realized that one word from him would turn the market place into a seething rebellion in which hundreds would die.

No, they'd be slaughtered in their tracks, and all his work . . .

His work . . .

Puppet's work . . .

Who were the Vorstachii? Gentle innocents beside the monsters that had sent him to die. What did the Earthmen care for him? The tool had accomplished the purpose it had been created for.

He saw Gar Lan gesture and he turned his head. Men with torches stepped forward. He wanted to cry out but invisible seals seemed to press upon his lips.

The men looked at him with awe. He stared at them until they dropped their eyes, but the torches touched the pile of faggots at his feet and the resinous wood blazed hotly.

He was dizzy suddenly, feeling the hate for his Earth masters welling within him.

He saw Marina standing in the crowd, her eyes filled with tears.

Tears for a mere thing like him?

After betrayal, tears?

God, the flames were hot, reaching up, blinding him with their smoke.

And the people silent, awed . . .

Well, he would die the way no Loaii had ever died. With dignity, giving them the dignity they had never had.

And the Vorstachii too.

For them too, for the Earthmen held both equal in the world they were shaping, and the teeming universe outside would one day receive the Loaii and the Vorstachii as equals . . .

The pain was blinding. He could barely see through the waves of heat and the great burning possessing his body.

He managed to shout then.

"I've given everything for you," he shouted to the market place.

"Don't fail me!"

And fire wrapped his body in agony.

In the last instant he saw it clearly, the greatness the Loaii and the Vorstachii would rise to, one race placing its feet on the star paths, meeting at last the brotherhood of races outside.

And it did not seem to be a small price for this, the price he was paying.

He could almost forgive those distant Earthmen who had made him for pain and death and . . .

Blackness . . .

But not death.

He should have realized that the race his ancestors had followed gladly from the caves, that generations of his race had served selflessly until they had become equals would not so casually de-

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sert him. The resurrection of Gar Lan's son should have told him how they would raise him in the end.

His whole being filled with love for the men who had brought him and his race to what they were, and with whom he and his kind were forever bound.

He opened his eyes in the room of the great ship beyond the clouds and beheld Them.

And near him, Marina's gentle voice said, "Welcome back, Baldur."

He rose with Marina's help, and they bowed before the Men.

"Lords," he said in the ancient ritual, "I am but a dog before you."

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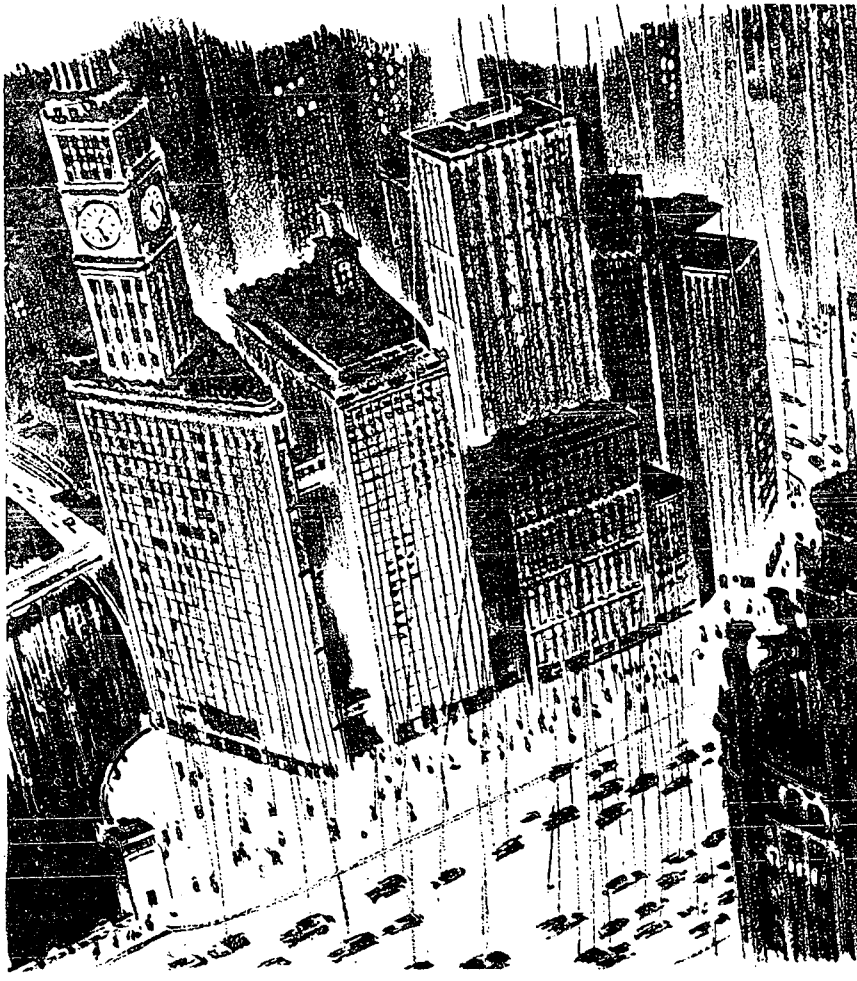
YOU'RE ALL ALONE

BY FRITZ LEIBER

Illustrated by HENRY SHARP



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These days—in case you haven't noticed—Fritz Leiber is fast becoming one of the most versatile and productive writers in the field. Here at Fantastic, *for example, we know him best for Gray Mouser stories like "Stardock" (September, 1965), but not so long ago his brilliant science-fiction novel* The Wanderer *(Ballantine, 1964) won a Hugo, and only last spring he delighted Burroughs fans everywhere with* Tarzan and the Valley of Gold *(authorized by the late master's estate). And now—to demonstrate his range even further—here's a pure fantasy so convincing that after reading it, you may be strongly tempted to pinch your nearest neighbor. Better not, though—he might* not *say ouch!*

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Just before Carr Mackay caught sight of the frightened girl, the world went dead on him. You've all had the experience. Suddenly the life drains out of everything. Familiar faces become pink patterns. Commonplace objects look weird. All sounds are loud and unnatural. Of course it lasts only a few moments, but it can be pretty disturbing.

It was pretty disturbing to Carr. Outwardly nothing in the big employment office had changed. The other interviewers were mostly busy with their share of the job-hunters who trickled into the Loop, converged on General Employment, and then went their ways again. There was the usual rat-ta-tat-tat of typing, the click of slides from the curtained cubicle where someone was getting an eye-test, and in the background Chicago's unceasing mutter, rising and falling with the passing elevated trains.

But to Carr Mackay it was all meaningless. The job-hunters seemed like ants trailing into and out of a hole. Big Tom Elvested at the next desk nodded at him, but that didn't break the spell. It was as if an invisible hand had been laid on his shoulder and a cold voice had said "You think it all adds up to something, brother. It doesn't."

It was then that the frightened girl came into the waiting room and sat down in one of the high-backed wooden benches. Carr watched her through the huge glass panel that made everything in the waiting room silent and slightly unreal. Just a slim girl in a cardigan. College type, with dark hair falling untidily to her shoulders. And nervous—in fact, frightened. Still, just another girl. Nothing tremendously striking about her.

And yet . . . the life flooded back into Carr's world as he watched her.

Suddenly she sat very still, looking straight ahead. Another woman had come into the waiting room. A big blonde, handsome in a posterish way, with a stunningly perfect hair-do. Yet her tailored suit gave her a mannish look and there was something queer about her eyes. She stood looking around. She saw the frightened girl. She started toward her.

The phone on Carr's desk buzzed.

As he picked it up, he noticed that the big blonde had stopped in front of the frightened girl and was looking down at her. The frightened girl seemed to be trying to ignore her.

"That you, Carr?" came over the phone.

He felt a rush of pleasure. "Hello, Marcia dear," he said quickly.

The voice over the phone sank to an exciting whipser. "Forgotten our date tonight?"

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"Of course not, dear," Carr assured her.

There was a faint laugh and then the phone voice purred, "That's right, darling. If anybody starts forgetting dates, it will be me. I like to agonize my men."

Carr felt his heart go from happy to uneasy. As he tried to figure out how to take Marcia's spur-scratch lightly, his gaze went back to the little drama beyond the glass wall. The big blonde had sat down beside the frightened girl and seemed to be stroking her hand. The frightened girl was still staring straight ahead—desperately, Carr thought.

"Did I hurt your feelings, Carr?" the phone voice inquired innocently.

"Of course not, dear."

"Because there aren't any other men—now—and I'm looking forward to tonight as something very special."

"I'll pick you up at seven," he said.

"That's right. Remember to look nice."

"I will." Then he asked in a lower voice, "Look, do you really mean it about tonight being something special?"

But his question was cut off by a "'Bye now, darling," and a click. Carr prepared to feel agonized as well as bored by the tail end of the afternoon—(If only Marcia weren't so beautiful, or so tormenting!)—when a flurry of footsteps made him look up.

The frightened girl was approaching his desk.

The big blonde had followed her as far as the door in the glass wall and was watching her from it.

The frightened girl sat down in the applicant's chair, but she didn't look him in the eye. She nervously gathered her wool jacket at the throat.

He twitched her a smile. "I don't believe I have your application folder yet, Miss . . . ?"

The frightened girl did not answer.

To put her at ease, Carr rattled on, "Not that it matters. We can talk over things while we wait for the clerk to bring it."

Still she didn't look at him. "I suppose you did fill out a folder and that you were sent to me?"

Then he saw that she was trembling and once again the life seemed to drain out of everything—except her. It was as if the whole office—Chicago—the world—had become mere background for a chalk-faced girl in a sloppy cardigan, arms huddled tight around her, hands gripping her thin elbows, staring at him horror struck.

For some incredible reason, she seemed to be frightened of *him.*

She shrank down in the chair, her white-circled eyes fixed on his. As they followed her movement, another shudder went through her. The tip of her

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tongue licked her upper lip. Then she said in a small, terrified voice, "All right, you've got me. But don't draw it out. Don't play with me. Get it over with."

Carr checked the impulse to grimace incredulously. He chuckled and said, "I know how you feel. Coming into a big employment office does seem an awful plunge. But we won't chain you to a rivet gun," he went on, with a wild attempt at humor, "or sell you to the white slavers. It's still a free country. You can do as you please."

She did not react. He looked away uneasily. The big blonde was still watching from the doorway, her manner implying that she owned the place. Her eyes looked whiter than they should be and they didn't seem quite to focus.

He looked back at the frightened girl. Her hands still gripped her elbows, but she was leaning forward now and studying his face, as if everything in the world depended on what she saw there.

"You're not one of them?" she asked.

He frowned puzzledly. "Them? Who?"

"You're not?" she repeated, still watching his eyes.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Don't you know what you are?" she asked with sudden fierceness. "Don't you know whether you're one of them or not?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he assured her, "and I haven't the faintest idea of whom you mean by 'them.'"

Slowly her hands loosened their hold on her elbows and trailed into her lap. "No," she said, "I guess you're not. You haven't their filthy look."

"You'd better explains things from the beginning," Carr told her.

"Please, not now," she begged.

"Who's that woman following you?" he pressed. "Is she one of 'them?'"

The terror returned to her face. "I can't tell you that. Please don't ask me. And please don't look at her. It's terribly important that she doesn't think I've seen her."

"But how could she possibly think otherwise after the way she planked herself down beside you?"

"Please, oh please," She was almost whimpering. "I can't tell you why. It's just terribly important that we act naturally, that we seem to be doing whatever we're supposed to be doing. Can we?"

Carr studied her. She was obviously close to hysteria. "Sure," he said. He leaned back in his chair, smiled at her, and raised his voice a trifle. "Just what sort of a job do you feel would make the best use of your abilities, Miss . . . ?"

"Job? Oh yes, that's why I'd

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have come here, isn't it?" For a moment she stared at him helplessly. Then, the words tumbling over each other, she began to talk. "Let's see, I can play the piano. Not very well. Mostly classical. I've studied a lot, though. I once wanted to be a concert pianist. And I've done some amateur acting. And I used to play a mediocre game of tennis—" Her grotesquely animated expression froze. "But that isn't the sort of thing you want to know is it?"

Carr shrugged. "Helps give me a picture. Did some amateur acting myself once, in college." He kept his voice casual. "Have you had any regular jobs?"

"Once I worked for a little while in an architect's office."

"Did you learn to read blueprints?" he asked.

"Blueprints?" The girl shivered. "Not much, I'm afraid. I hate patterns. Patterns are traps. If you live according to a pattern, other people know how to get control of you." She leaned forward confidingly, her fingers touching the edge of the desk. "Oh, and I'm a good judge of people. I have to be. I suppose you have to be too." She looked at him strangely. "Don't you really know what you are?" she asked softly. "Haven't you found out yet? Why, you must be almost forty. Surely in that time . . . Oh, you must know."

"I still haven't the ghost of an idea what you're talking about," Carr said. "What am I?"

The girl hesitated.

"Tell me," she said.

She shook her head. "If you honestly don't know, I don't think I should tell you. As long as you don't know, you're relaitvely safe."

"From what? Please stop being mysterious," Carr said. "Just what is it about me that's so important?"

"But if I don't tell you," she went on, disregarding his question, "then I'm letting you run a blind risk. Not a big one, but very horrible. And with them so close and perhaps suspecting . . . Oh, it's hard to decide."

A clerk dropped an application folder in the wire basket on Carr's desk. He looked at it. It wasn't for a girl at all. It started, "Jimmie Kozacs. Male. Age 43."

He realized that the frightened girl was studying his face again.

"Maybe you weren't what I think you are, until today," she was saying more to herself than him. "Maybe my bursting in here was what did it. Maybe I was the one who awakened you." She clenched her hands, torturing the palms with the long, untapering fingers. "To think that I would ever do that to anyone! To think that I would ever cause anyone the agony that *he* caused me!"

The bleak misery in her voice caught at Carr. "What *is* the matter?" He pleaded. "Now we've got

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a 'he' as well as a 'they.' And what is this business about 'awakening?" Please tell me everything."

The girl looked shocked. "Now?" Her glance half-circled the room, strayed toward the glass wall. "No, not here. I can't." Her right hand suddenly dived into the pocket of her cardigan and came out with a stubby, chewed pencil. She ripped a sheet from Carr's scratch pad and began to scribble hurriedly.

Carr started to lean forward, but just then a big area of serge suit swam into view. Big Tom Elvested had ambled over from the next desk. The girl gave him an odd look, then went on scribbling. Tom ignored her.

"Say, Carr," he boomed amiably, "remember the girl Midge and I wanted you to go on a double date with? I've told you about her—Jane Gregg. Well, she's going to be dropping in here a little later and I want you to meet her. Midge had an idea the four of us might be able to go out together tonight."

"Sorry, I've got a date," Carr told him sharply. It annoyed Carr that Tom should discuss private matters so loudly in front of an applicant.

"Okay, okay," Tom retored a bit huffily. "I'm not asking you to do social service work. This girl's darn good-looking."

"That's swell," Carr told him.

Tom looked at him skeptically. "Anyway," he warned, "I'll be bringing her over when she comes in." And he faded back toward his desk. As he did so, the frightened girl shot him an even odder look, but her pencil kept on scribbling. The scratch of it seemed to Carr the only real sound in the whole office. He glanced guardedly down the aisle. The big blonde with the queer eyes was still at the door, but she had moved ungraciously aside to make way for a dumpy man in blue jeans, who was looking around uncertainly.

The dumpy man veered toward one of the typists. Her head bobbed up and she said something to him. He gave her an "I gotcha pal" nod and headed for Carr's desk.

The frightened girl noticed him coming, shoved aside paper and pencil in a flurry of haste, and stood up.

"Sit down," Carr said. "That fellow can wait. Incidently, do you know Tom Elvested?"

She disregarded the question and quickly moved into the aisle.

Carr followed her. "I really want to talk with you, he said.

"No, she breathed, edging away from him.

"But we haven't got anywhere yet," he objected.

Suddenly she smiled like a toothpaste ad. "Thank you for being so helpful," she said in a loud voice. "I'll think over what you've told me, though I don't

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think the job is one which would appeal to me." She poked out her hand. Automatically Carr took it. It was icy.

"Don't follow me," she whispered. "And if you care the least bit for me or my safety, don't do anything, whatever happens."

"But I don't even know your name . . ." His voice trailed off. She was striding rapidly down the aisle. The big blonde was standing squarely in her path. The girl did not swerve an inch. Then, just as the were about to collide, the big blonde lifted her hand and gave the girl a stinging slap across the cheek.

Carr started, winced, took a forward step, froze.

The big blonde stepped aside, smiling sardonically.

The girl rocked, wavered for a step or two, then walked on without turning her head.

No one said anything, no one did anything, no one even looked up, at least not obviously, though everyone in the office must have heard the slap if they hadn't seen it. But with the universal middle-class reluctance, Carr thought, to recognize that nasty things happened in the world, they pretended not to notice.

The big blonde flicked into place a shellacked curl, glancing around her as if at so much dirt. Leisurely she turned and stalked out.

Chapter II

The most terrible secret in the world? Here's a hint. Think about the people closest to you. What do you know about what's really going on inside their heads? Nothing, brother, nothing at all . . .

Carr walked back to his desk. His face felt hot, his mind turbulent, the office sinister. The dumpy man in blue jeans had already taken the girl's place, but Carr ignored him. He didn't sit down. The scrap of paper on which the girl had scribbled caugh his eye. He picked it up.

Watch out for the wall-eyed blonde, the young man without a hand, and the affable-seeming older man. But the small dark man with glasses may be your friend.

Carr frowned grotesquely. ". . .wall-eyed blonde . . ." —that must be the woman who had watched. But as for the other three— ". . . small dark man with glasses may be your friend . . ." —why, it sounded like a charade.

"Carr, if you can spare a moment . . ." Carr recognized Tom Elvested's voice but for the moment he ignored it. He started to turn over the paper to see if the frightened girl had scribbled any-

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thing on the other side, when—

". . . I would like to introduce Jane Gregg," Tom finished.

Carr looked around at Tom—and forgot everything else.

Big Tom Elvested was smiling fatuously. "Jane," he said, "this is Carr Mackay. Carr, this is Jane." And he moved his hand in the gesture of one who gives a friendly squeeze to the elbow of a person standing beside him.

Only there was no person standing beside him.

Where Tom's gesture had indicated Jane Gregg should be standing, there was only empty air.

Tom's smiling face went from empty air to Carr and back again. He said, "I've been wanting to get you two together for a long time."

Carr almost laughed, there was something so droll about the realism of Tom's actions. He remembered the pantomimes in the acting class at college, when you pretended to eat a dinner or drive an automobile, without any props, just going through the motions. In that class Tom Elvested would have rated an A-plus.

Tom nodded his head and coyly asked the empty air, "And does he seem as interesting, now that you've actually met him?"

Suddenly Carr didn't want to laugh at all. If there was anything big Tom Elvested ordinarily wasn't, it was an actor.

"She's a cute little trick, isn't she, Carr?" Tom continued, giving the air another playful pat.

Carr moved forward, incidently running a hand through the air, which was quite as empty as it looked. "Cut the kidding, Tom," he said.

Tom merely rocked on his heels, like an elephant being silly. Once again his hand moved out, this time to flick the air at a point a foot higher. "And such lovely hair. I always go for the page boy style myself."

"Cut it out, Tom, please," Carr said seriously.

"Of course, maybe she's a little young for you," Tom babbled on.

"Cut it out!" Carr snapped. His face was hardly a foot from Tom's but Tom didn't seem to see him at all. Instead he kept looking through Carr toward where Carr had been standing before. And he kept on playfully patting the air.

"Oh yes," he assured the air with a smirk, "Carr's quite a wolf. That's the reason he had those few gray hairs. They're a wolf insignia. You'll have to watch your step with him."

"Cut it out!" Carr repeated angrily and grabbed Tom firmly by the shoulders.

What happened made Carr wish he hadn't. Tom Elvested's face grew strained and red, like an enraged baby's. An intense throbbing was transmitted to Carr's hands. And from Tom's lips came a mounting, meaningless mutter, like a sound tape running back-

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wards at very high speed.

Carr jerked away. He felt craven and weak, as helpless as a child. He edged off until there were three desks between himself and Tom, and he was standing behind Ernie Acosta, who was busy with a client.

He could hardly bring his voice to a whisper.

"Ernie," he repeated, louder, "I need your help."

Ernie continued to talk to his client.

Across the room Carr say a gray-mustached man walking briskly. He hurried over to him, glancing back apprehensively at Tom, who was still standing ther red-faced and softly babbling.

"Dr. Wexler," he blurted, "I'm afraid Tom Elvested's had some sort of attack. Would you—?"

But Dr. Wexler walked on without slackening his pace and disappeared through the black curtains of the eye-testing cubicle.

At that instant, as Carr watched the black curtains swing together, a sudden spasm of extreme terror seized him. As if something huge and hostile were poised behind him, he dared not make a move.

His feelings were like those of a man in a waxworks museum, who speaks to a guide only to find that he has addressed one of the wax figures.

His paralyzed thoughts, suddenly working like lightening, snatched at that idea.

What if the whole world were like a waxworks museum? In motion, of course, like clockworks, but utterly mindless, purposeless, mechanical.

What if a wax figure named Jane Gregg had come alive and moved from her place—or merely been removed, unalive, as a toy is lifted out of a shop window? What if the whole show was going on without her, because the whole show was just a machine and didn't know or care whether a figure named Jane Gregg was there or not?

That would explain Tom Elvested going through the motions of an introduction—one mechanical figure carrying on just as well without its partner.

What if the frightened girl had been a mechanical figure come alive and out of her place in the machine—and desperately trying to pretend that she *was* in her place, because something suspected her? That would fit with the things she'd said.

What if he, Carr Mackay, a mechanical figure like the others, had come alive and stepped out of his place? That would explain why Ernie and Dr. Wexler had disregarded him.

What if it really were true? The whole universe a mindless machine. People just mindless parts of that machine. Only a very few of them really conscious, really alive.

What if the ends of the earth were nearer to you than the mind

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you thought lay behind the face you spoke to?

What if the things people said, the things that seemed to mean so much to you, were something recorded on a kind of phonograph disk a million million years ago?

What if you were all alone?

Very, very slowly (Carr felt that if he made a quick move, the huge and hostile something poised behind him would grab) he looked around the office. Every thing was proceeding normally: murmur-murmur, rat-a-tat-tat, click-click, (and outside rumble-rumble.)

Just like a machine.

What did you do if you found that the whole world was a machine, and that you were out of your proper place in it?"

There was only one thing to do.

Still very, very slowly, Carr edged back to his desk. Tom Elvested had gone back to his own desk and sat down, was leafing through some record cards. He did not look up.

The dumpy man in blue jeans was still sitting in front of Carr's desk. He was talking at Carr's empty chair.

"So you really figure you can get me a job in magnetic at Norcross Aircraft?" he was saying. "That'll be swell."

The mechanical interview had been going on just as well without the interviewer.

Carr cringed down into his chair. With shaking fingers he picked up the last application folder and read again, "Jimmie Kozacs. Age 43." The dumpy man looked about that age. Then, further down, "Magnetic Inspector."

The dumpy man stood up and plucked something invisible from the air, squinted at it, and remakred, "So all I got to do is show them this at the gate?"

"Yes, Mr. Kozacs," Carr heard himself whisper in a cracked voice.

"Swell," said the dumpy man. "Thanks a lot, er . . ." (He glanced at the nameplate on Carr's desk) ". . . Mr. Mackay. Aw, don't get up. Well, thanks a lot."

The dumpy man thrust out his hand. With a great effort, Carr thrust his own hand into it. He felt his fingers clamped and pumped up and down, as if by rubber-padded machinery.

"Good luck, Mr. Kozacs," he croaked.

The dumpy man nodded and walked off.

Yes, there was only one thing to do.

A creature with a toothbrush mustache and a salesman's smile and eczema scars half-hidden by powder was approaching the chair the dumpy man had vacated. Carr snatched up the next folder—there were two or three in the wire basket now—and braced himself.

. . . one thing. You could go to your place in the machine and

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pretend to be part of it, so that the huge and hostile something wouldn't notice you were alive.

The creature with the toothbrush mustache seated itself without asking.

"Mr. Weston, I believe," Carr quavered, consulting the folder.

"That's right," the creature replied.

From the next desk Tom Elvested gave Carr a big mechanical grin and a meaningless wink, just like a ventriloquist's giant dummy.

Chapter III

Sure, that's the secret—the world's just a big engine. All matter, no mind. You doubt it? Look at a big-city crowd. The don't see you, brother. They don't see anything. They're just parts of a big engine . . .

By the time five-fifteen came and Carr hurried down the brass-edged steps, taking them three at a time, and darted across the lobby and pushed through the squirrel cage of the revolving door, he had mastered his terror—or at least made a good start toward rationalizing his one big fear.

Perhaps he had just happened to meet a half dozen psychotics in one day—after all, employment offices have more of a lunatic fringe than most businesses.

Perhaps he had suffered some peculiar hallucinations, including the illusion that he'd been talking loudly when he'd just been whispering.

Perhaps most of it had been an elaborate practical joke—Tom and Ernie were both great kidders.

But when he stepped out of the revolving door into a pandemonium of honking, clanking, whistling, shouting—faces that leaped, elbows that jostled, lights that glared—he found that all his rationalizations rang hollow. There was something terribly like a machine in the swift pound of Chicago's rush-hour rhythm, he thought as he plunged into it.

Perhaps thinking of people solely as clients of General Employment was what was wrong with him, he tried to persuade himself with grim humor. For so long he had been thinking of people as mere human raw material, as window dummies to be put on display or routed back to the storeroom, that now they were having their revenge on him, by acting as if he didn't exist.

He reached Michigan Boulevard. The wall of empty space on the other side, fronting the wall of buildings on this, hinted at the lake byond. The Art Institue traced a classic pattern against the gray sky. The air carried a trace of freshness from the morning's rain.

Carr turned north, stepping out briskly. For the first time in two hours he began to think of Mar-

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cia—and that was a good defense against any sort of fear. He pictured her as he'd last seen her, in an exquitisely tailored black suit and stockings that were a faint dark glow on pale flesh.

But just then his attention was diverted to a small man walking a little way ahead of him at an equally fast pace. Carr's legs were considerably longer, but the small man had a peculiar skip to his stride. He was constantly weaving, seeking the open channels in the crowd.

Carr felt a surge of curiosity. He was tempted to increase his pace so that he could get a look at the stranger's face.

At that moment the small man whirled around. Carr stopped. The small man peered at him through horn-rimmed, thick-lensed glasses. Then a look of extreme horror crossed the stranger's swarthy face. For a moment he crouched as if paralyzed. Then he turned and darted away, dancing past people, scurrying from side to side, finally whisking out of sight around the next corner like a puppet jerked offstage.

Carr wanted to laugh wildly. The frightened girl had written, "But the small dark man with glasses may be your friend." He certainly hadn't acted that way!

Someone bumped into Carr from behind and he started forward again. It was as if the governor of a machine, temporarily out of order, had begun to function. He was back in the rush-hour rhythm.

He looked down the next cross street, but the small dark mak was nowhere in sight.

Carr smiled. It occurred to him that he really had no good reason to believe that this had been the frightened girl's small dark man. After all, there must be tens of thousands of small dark men with glasses in the world.

But he found he couldn't laugh off the incident quite that easily. Not that it brought back the one big fear, but that it reawakened the earlier mood that the frightened girl had evoked—a mood of frustrated excitement, as if all around him there were a hidden world alive with mystery and wonder, to which he couldn't quite find the door.

His memory fixed on the frightened girl. He pictured her as a college kid, the sort who would cut classes in order to sit on the brhink of a fountain and argue with some young man about the meaning of art. With pencil smudges on her cheeks. The picture fitted, all right. Only consider the howling naivete of her wondering whether she had "awakened" him.

And yet even that question might cut a lot deeper than you'd think. Wasn't there a sense in which he actually was unawakened?—a person who'd dodged life, who'd always had that sense of a vastly richer and more vivid

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existence just out of reach.

For that matter, didn't most people live their lives without really ever awakening—as dull as worms, as mechanical as insects, their thoughts spoonfed to them by newspaper and radio? Couldn't robots perform the much over-rated business of living just as well?

As he asked himself that question, the big fear returned. The life drained out of the bobbing faces around him. The scissoring of the many legs became no less mechanical than the spinning of the wheels beyond the curb. The smoky pattern of light and darkness that was Chicago became the dark metal of a giant machine. And once again there was the feeling of something huge and hostile poised behind him.

Back in the office he had found one thing to do when that feeling struck—go to his place in the machine and pretend to be part of it. But out here what was his place?

He knew in a general way what he had to do. Go home, change, pick up Marcia. But by what route and at what speed?

Each step involved a decision. Should it be fast or slow? Should you glance at shop windows, or keep your eyes fixed ahead? Should you turn at the next corner? If you did, it might change your whole life. Or if you didn't. If you stopped and tried to decide, if you loitered, you might be lost.

But perhaps you were supposed to loiter. Perhaps you were supposed to stop dead, letting the crowd surge past you. Perhaps you were supposed to grin at the robots with twitching lips, gathering your breath for an earsplitting scream, inviting the pounce of that huge and hostile something.

Or perhaps you were only supposed to go on, step after dragging step, toward the bridge.

Chapter IV

A big engine— only every now and then one of the parts comes alive, for no more reason than a radio active atom pops. That come-alive part is up against a big problem, brother Don't envy him or her . . .

By the time Carr had crossed the big windy bridge and threaded his way through the dark streets of the Near North Side to the old brownstone house in which he rented a room, he had once more mastered the big fear. The hallway was musty and dim. He hurried up the ornately balustraded stairs, relic of the opulent days of the 1890's. A small stained glass window, mostly patches of dark red and purple, gave the only light.

Just as he reached the turn, he thought he saw himself coming toward himself in the gloom. A moment later he recognized the

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figure for his reflection in the huge old mirror, its frame still showing glints of gilt, that occupied most of the wall space of the landing.

But still he stood there, staring at the dark-engulfed image of a tall, rather slightly built man with light hair and small, regular features.

There he was—Carr Mackay. And all around him was an unknown universe. And just what, in that universe, did Carr Mackay mean or matter? What was the real significance of the dark rhythm that was rushing him through life at an ever hastening pace toward a grave somewhere? Did it have any significance—especially when any break in the rhythm could make it seem so dead and purposeless, an endless marching and counter-marching of marionettes?

He ran blindly past his reflection up the stairs.

In the hall above it was darker still. A bulb had burned out and not been replaced. He felt his way down the corridor and unlocked the tall door of his room.

It was high-ceilinged and comfortable, with rich old woodwork that ten layers of cheap paint couldn't quite spoil. There was even an ancient gas fixture swinging out from the wall, though it probably hadn't been used for anything for the last thirty years except cooking on the sly. Carr tried to let the place take him and cradle him in its suggestion of the familiar and his life with Marcia and her crowd, make him forget that lost Carr Mackay down there in the mirror. There were his golf clubs in the corner, the box for shirt studs with the theatre program beside it, the sleek military hairbrushes Marcia had given him. But tonight they seemed as arbitrary and poignantly useless an assortment of objects as those placed in an Egyptian tomb, to accompany their owner on his long trek through the underworld.

They were not as alive, even, as the long-unopened box of chessmen or the tarnished silver half-pint flask.

He slung his brown suit on a hanger, hung it in the closet, and reached down his blue suit, still in its wrapper from the cleaner's.

There in the gloom he seemed to see the face of the frightened girl. He could make out the hunted eyes, the thin features, the nervous lips.

She knew the doorway to the hidden world, the answer to the question the dark-engulfed Mackay had been asking.

The imagined lips parted, as if she were about to speak.

With an angry exhalation of held breath, Carr jerked back into the room. What could he be thinking? It was only in wistful books that men of thirty-nine fell in love with moody, mysterious, coltish college girls. Or

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were caught up in the glamorously sinister intrigues that existed solely in such girls' hothouse brains.

He put on his blue suit, then started to transfer to it the stuff in the pockets of the brown one. He came upon the note the frightened girl had scribbled. He must have shoved it there when Tom Elvested had started misbehaving. He turned it over and saw that he hadn't read all of it.

> If you want to meet me again in spite of dangers, I'll be by the lion's tail near the five sisters tonight at eight.

His lips twisted in a wry smile. If that didn't prove she'd been suckled on *The Prisoner of Zenda* and weaned on *Graustark,* he'd like to know! She probably carried the Rajah's ruby in a bag around her neck and wrote love letters with a black swan's quill —and she could stop haunting his imagination right now!

No, there was no question but that Marcia was the woman for him—charming, successful, competent at both business and pleasure—even if she did like to be tormenting. What competition could be offered by a mere maladjusted girl?

He hurried into the bathroom, rubbing his chin. Marcia liked him to be well-groomed, and his beard felt pretty conspicuous. He looked into the mirror to confirm his suspicions and once again he saw a different Carr Mackay.

The one on the stairs had seemed lost. This one, framed in surgical white, looked trapped. A neat, wooden Mackay who went trudging through life without inquiring what any of the signposts meant. A stupid Mackay. A dummy.

He really ought to shave, yes, but the way he was feeling, the sooner he and Marcia got started drinking, the better. He'd skip shaving this once.

As he made this decision, he was conscious of a disproportionate feeling of guilt.

He'd probably been reading too many "Five O'Clock Shadow" ads.

Forget it.

He hurried into the rest of his clothes, started toward the door, stopped by the bureau, pulled open the top drawer, looked longingly for a moment at the three flat pints of whiskey nestling inside. Then he shut the drawer quickly and hurried down the staris, averting his eyes from the mirror. It was a relief to know that he'd be with Marcia in a few minutes.

But eight dark blocks are eight dark blocks, and they have to be walked, and to walk them takes time no matter how rapidly you stride. Time for your sense of purpose and security to dwindle to nothing. Time to get away from the ads and the pink lights and

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the radio voices and to think a little about the universe—to realize that it's a place of mystification and death, with no more feeling than a sausage grinder for the life oozing through it.

The buildings to either side became the walls of a black runway, and the occasional passers-by shadow-swathed automatons. He became conscious of the dark rhythm of existence as a nerve-twisting, insistent thing that tugged at him like a marionette's strings, trying to drag him back to some pattern from which he had departed.

Being with Marcia would fix him up, he told himself, as the dark facades crept slowly by. She at least couldn't ever become a stranger.

But he had forgotten her face.

A trivial thing. A face is as easy to forget as the special place where you've put something for safe-keeping.

Carr tried to remember it. A hundred faces blinked and faded in his mind, some of them so hauntingly suggestive of Marcia that for a moment he would think, "That's her," some of them grotesquely different.

Light from a first story window spilled on the face of a girl in a blue slicker just as she passed him. His heart pounded. He had almost grabbed her and said, "Marcia!" And she hadn't been Marcia's type at all.

He walked faster. The apartment tower where Marcia lived edged into sight, grew threateningly tall.

He hurried up the flagstone walk flanked by shrubbery. The lobby was a long low useless room with lots of carved wood and red leather. He stopped at the desk. The clerk was talking to someone over the phone. Carr waited, but the clerk seemed determined to prolong the conversation. Carr cleared his throat. The clerk yawned and languorously flexed the arm that held the receiver, as if to call attention to the gold seal ring and cuff-linked wrist.

A few steps beyond, the elevator was waiting. Although he knew Marcia always liked him to call up first, Carr delayed no longer. He walked into the cage and said, "Seven, please."

But the tiny gray-haired woman did not move. She seemed to be asleep. She was perched on her stool in front of the panel of buttons like some weary old jungle bird. Carr started to touch her shoulder, but at the last moment reached impulsively beyond to press the seven button.

The door closed with a soft crunch and the cage started upward. The ring of keys at the operator's waist jingled faintly, but she did not wake. Her lips worked and she muttered faintly.

The cage stopped at seven. Again the keys jingled faintly. The door opened. With one last

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glance at the sleeping woman, Carr stepped softly out. Just before he reached Marcia's door, he heard the operator make a funny little sound between a yawn and a sigh and a laugh, and he heard the door close and the cage start down.

In front of Marcia's door Carr hesitated. She mightn't like him barging in this way. But who could be expected always to await the pleasure of that prissy clerk?

Behind him he heard the cage stop at the ground floor.

He noticed that the door he faced was ajar.

"Marcia," he called. "Marcia?" His voice came out huskily.

He stepped inside. The white-shaded lamp showed dull pearl walls, white bookcase, blue overstuffed sofa with a coat and yellow silk scarf tossed across it, and a faint curl of cigarette smoke.

The bedroom door was open. He crossed to it, his footsteps soundless on the thick carpet. He stopped.

Marcia was sitting at the dressing table. She was wearing a light gray negligee with a silvery sheen. It touched and fell away from her figure in graceful folds, half revealing her breasts. A squashed cigarette smoldered in a tiny silver ash tray. She was lacquering her nails.

That was all. But to Carr it seemed that he had blundered into one of those elaborately realistic department store window displays. He almost expected to see faces peering in the dark window, seven stories up.

Modern bedroom in rose and smoke. Seated mannequin at vanity table. Perhaps a placard in script: "Point up your Pinks with Gray."

He stood stupidly a step short of the doorway, saying nothing.

In the mirror her eyes seemed to meet his. She went on lacquering her nails.

She might be angry with him for not phoning from downstairs. But it wasn't like Marcia to choose this queer way of showing her displeasure.

Or was it?

He watched her face in the mirror. It was the one he had forgotten, all right. There were the firm lips, the cool forehead framed by reddish hair, the fleeting quirks of expression—definitely hers.

Yet recognition did not bring the sense of absolute certainty it should. Something was lacking—the feeling of a reality behind the face, animating it.

She finished her nails and held them out to dry. The negligee fell open a bit further.

Could this be another of her tricks for tormenting him? Marcia, he knew, thoroughly enjoyed his helpless desire and especially those fits of shyness for which he

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berated himself afterwards.

But she wouldn't draw it out so long.

A sharp surge of uneasiness went through Carr. This was nonsensical, he told himself. In another moment she must move or speak—or *he* must. But his throat was constricted and his legs felt numb.

And then it came back: the big fear.

What if Marcia weren't really alive at all, not consciously alive, but just a part of a dance of mindless atoms, a clockworks show that included the whole world, except himself? Merely by coming a few minutes ahead of time, merely by omitting to shave, he had broken the clockworks rhythm. That was why the clerk hadn't spoken to him, why the operator had been asleep, why Marcia didn't greet him. It wasn't time yet for those little acts in the clockworks show.

The creamy telephone tinkled. Lifting it gingerly, fingers stiffly spread, the figure at the vanity held it to her ear a moment and said, "Thank you. Tell him to come up."

She inspected her nails, waved them, looked at her reflection in the glass, belted her negligee.

Through the open door Carr could hear the drone of the rising cage.

Marcia started to get up, hesitated, sat down again, smiled.

The cage stopped. There was the soft jolt of its door opening. He heard the operator's voice, but no one else's. He waited for footsteps. They didn't come.

That was *his* elevator, he thought with a shudder, the one *he* was supposed to come up in. The woman had brought it to seven without him, for that was part of the clockworks show.

Suddenly Marcia turned. "Darling," she called, rising quickly, "the door's open." She came toward him.

The hairs on the back of his neck lifted. She wasn't looking straight at him, he felt, but at something behind him. *She was watching him come through the living room.*

She moistened her lips. Her arms went out to him. Just before they touched him, Carr jerked back.

The arms closed on air. Marcia lifted her face. Her back arched as if there were a strong arm around it. There was the sloppy sound of a kiss.

Carr shook as he backed across the living room. "That's enough for you, darling," he heard Marcia murmur sharply to the air. He spun around and darted into the hall—not to the elevator, but to the stairs beyond.

As he plunged down them in strides that were nightmarishly long and slow, a thought popped to the surface of his mind.

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The meaning of a phrase he had read uncomprehendingly an hour before: ". . . the lion's tail near the five sisters . . ."

Chapter V

If you catch on to the secret, you'd better keep your mouth shut. It never brought anybody anything but grief. If you've got friends, the kindest thing you can do for them is not to let them find out . . .

Few people walk on the east side of Michigan Boulevard after dark. At such times the Art Institute looks very dead. Headlights coming down Adams play on its dark stone like archeologists' flashlights. The two majestic bronze lions might be guarding the portals of some monument of Roman antiquity. The tail of one of the lions, conveniently horizontal and kept polished by the casual elbows of art students and idlers, now served as a backrest for the frightened girl.

She silently warched Carr mount the steps. He might be part of some dream she was having. A forbiddingly cold wind was whipping in from the lake and she had buttoned up her cardigan. Carr stopped a half dozen paces away.

After a moment she smiled and said, "Hello."

Carr smiled jerkily in reply and moved toward her. His first words surprised him.

"I met your small dark man with glasses. He ran away."

"Oh? I'm sorry. He really might be your friend. But he's . . . timid," she added, her lips setting in bitter lines. "He can't always be depended on. He was supposed to meet me here, but . . ." She glanced, shrugging her shoulders, toward the electric numerals glowing high above the north end of Grant Park. "I had some vague idea of introducing the two of you, but now I'm not so sure." The wind blew strands of her shoulder-length hair against her cheek. "I never really thought you'd come, you know. Leaving notes like that is just a way I have of tempting fate. You weren't supposed to guess. How did you know it was one of these lions?"

Carr laughed. "Taft's Great Lakes fountain is a minor obsession of mine. I always try to figure out which of the five sisters is which lake. And of course that's just around the corner." He instantly grew serious again and moved closer to her. "I want to ask you a question," he said.

"Yes?" she asked guardedly.

"Do you think I'm insane?"

Headlights from Adams swept across her gray eyes, enigmatic

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as those of a sphinx. "That's hardly a question for a stranger to answer." She looked at him a while longer and shook her head. "No, I don't," she said softly.

"All right," he said, "grant I'm sane. Then answer this: Do you think it's reasonably possible for a sane person to meet eight or ten insane ones, some of them people he knows, all in one day? And I don't mean in an asylum."

I don't know," she whispered. Then, unwillingly, "I suppose not."

"All right," he said. "Then comes the big question: Do you think . . . (He had trouble getting the words out) ". . . that most people are really alive?"

She seemed to shrink in size. Her face was all in shadow. "I don't undersdand," she faltered.

"I mean," he said, "do you really believe there's anything behind most people's foreheads but blackness? Do they really think and act, or are they just mindless parts of a mindless pattern?" His voice grew stronger. "Do you think that all that—" (He swept his hand along the boulevard and the towering buildings and the darkness) "—is really alive, or contains life? Or is all Chicago just a big machine, with people for parts?"

She fairly sprang at him from the shadows. The next instant her hands were gripping his together and her strained and apprehensive face was inches from his own.

"Never think that!" she told him rapidly. "Don't even toy with such crazy ideas!"

"Why not?" he demanded, his prisoned hands throbbing as if from an electric shock. "If you'd seen what I've seen today—"

Without warning she laughed gayly, loosed his tingling hands, and spun away from him. "Idiot!" she said in a voice that rippled with laughter, "I know what's happened to you. You've been scared by life. You've magnified a few funny things into a morbid idea."

"A few funny things?" he demanded, confused by her startling change of behavior. "Why, if you'd seen—"

"I don't care!" she interrupted with triumphant gayety. "Whatever it is, it's foolishness." Her eyes, dancing with an infectious excitement, fixed on his. "Come with me," she said, "and I'll show you that all that—" (She swept her hand, as he had, at the boulevard) "—is safe and warm and friendly."

"But—" he began.

She danced toward him. "Is it a date?" she asked.

"Well—"

"Is it, Mr. Serious?"

He couldn't stop a big grin. "Yes," he told her.

She held up a finger. "You've

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got to remember that this is *my* date, that I pick the places we go and that whatever I do, you fall in with it."

"Like follow-the-leader?"

"Exactly like follow-the-leader. Tonight I'm showing you Chicago. That's the agreement."

"All right," he said.

"Then come on."

"What's your name?" he said, catching her elbow.

"Jane," she told him.

"Jane what?"

"You don't need to know," she replied impishly.

"Wait a minute," he said, pulling them to a stop. "Is it Jane Gregg?"

He couldn't tell from her face whether that question meant anything to her. "I won't tell you," she said, pulling at him.

"Do you know Tom Elvested?" he continued.

"I won't answer foolish questions like that," she assured him. "Oh come on, you've got to get in the spirit of the thing, what's-your-name."

"Carr. Two R's," he told her quietly.

"Then we turn north here, Carr," she told him.

"Where to?" he asked.

She looked at him severely. "Follow the leader," she reminded him and laughed and raced ahead. He had to run to keep up with her, and by that time he was laughing too.

They were a block from the Institute when Carr asked, "What about your friend, though—the small dark man with glasses?"

"I don't care," she said. "If he comes now, he can have a date with the five sisters."

"Incidentally," Carr asked, "what's his real named?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Are they after him too?" Carr persisted, his voice growing somber.

"Who?"

"Those three people you warned me against."

"I don't want to talk about them." Her voice was suddenly flat. "They're obscene and horrible and I don't want to think about them at all."

"But look, Jane, what sort of hold do they have on you? Why did you let that big blonde slap you without doing anything?"

"I tell you I won't talk about them! If you go on like this, there won't be any date." She turned on him, gripping his arm. "Oh, Carr, you're spoiling everything," she told him, close to tears. "Do get in the spirit, like you promised."

"All right," he said gently, "I will, really." He linked his arm through hers and for a while they walked in silence. The wind and the gloom and the wide empty sidewalk seemed strange and lonely so close to the boulevard with its humming cars and its

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fringe of people and lights on the other side.

Her arm tightened a little on his. "This is fun," she said.

"What?"

"Having a date."

"I shouldn't think you'd have any trouble," he told her.

"Oh? You don't know anything about my troubles—and we're not going to talk about them tonight! Here we turn again."

The were opposite the public library. She led him across the boulevard. It seemed to Carr the loneliness followed them, for they passed only two people as they went by the library.

They squinted against blown grit. A sheet of newspaper flapped against their faces. Carr ripped it away and it swooped up into the air.

Jane led him down a cobbled alley choked with fire escapes, down some steps and into a little tavern.

The place was dimly lit. None of the booths were occupied. At the bar two men contemplated half empty glasses of beer.

"What'll you have?" Carr asked Jane.

"Let's wait a bit," she said, steering him instead to the last booth. Neither the two drinkers nor the fat and solumn bartender looked up as they went past.

They looked at each other across the splotched table. Color had come into Jane's cheeks. Carr found himself thinking of college days, when there had been hip flasks and roadsters and checks from home and classes to cut.

"It's funny," he said, "I've gone past this alley a hundred times and never noticed this place."

"Cities are like that," she said. "You think you know them when all you know are routes through them."

We're even beginning to talk about life, Carr thought.

One of the beer-drinkers put two nickels in the jukebox. Low strains eddied out.

Carr looked toward the bar. "Maybe they don't serve at the tables now," he said.

"Who cares?" she said. "Let's dance."

"I don't imagine it's allowed," he said. "They'd have to have another license."

"I told you you were scared of life," she said gayly. "Come on."

There wasn't much space, but enough. With what struck Carr as a grave and laudable politeness, the beer drinkers paid no attention to them at all, though one beat time softly with the bottom of his glass against his palm.

Jane danced badly, but after a while she got better. Somewhat solemnly they revolved in a modest circle. She said nothing until almost the end of the first number. Then, in a choked voice—

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"It's been so long since I've danced with anyone."

"Not with your man with glasses?" Carr asked.

She shook her head. "He's too scared of life all the time. He can't relax—not even pretend."

The second record started. Her expression cleared. She rested her cheek against his shoulder. "I've got a theory about life," she said dreamily. "I think life has a rhythm. It keeps changing with the time of day and year, but it's always there. People feel it without knowing it and it governs their lives."

"Like the music of the spheres?" Carr suggested.

"Yes, only that makes it sound too nice."

"What do you mean, Jane?"

"Nothing."

Another couple came in, took one of the front booths. The bartender wiped his hands on his apron, pushed up a wicket in the bar, and walked over to them.

The music stopped. Carr dug in his pocket for more nickels, but she shook her head. They slid back into their booth.

"I hope I didn't embarrass you," she said.

"Of course not."

A telephone rang. The fat bartender carefully put down the tray of drinks he had mixed for the other couple and went to answer it.

"Sure you don't want to dance some more?" Carr asked.

"No, let's just let things happen to us."

"A good idea," Carr agreed, "provided you don't push it too far. For instance, we did come here to get a drink, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did," Jane agreed. The impish expression returned to her eyes. She glanced at the two drinks standing on the bar. "Those look good," she said, "Let's have those."

He looked at her. "Seriously?"

"Why not? We were here first. Are you scared of life?"

He grinned at her and got up suddenly. She didn't stop him, rather to his surprise. Much more so, there was no squawk when he boldly clutched the glasses and returned with them.

Jane applauded soundlessly. He bowed and set down the drinks with a flourish. They sipped.

She smiled. "That's another of my theories. You can get away with anything if you aren't scared. Other people can't stop you, because they're more scared than you are."

Carr smiled at her.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"Do you know the first name I gave you?" he asked.

"No."

"The frightened girl. Incidentally, what did startle you so when you sat down at my desk this afternoon. You seemed to sense something in me that terrified

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you. What could it have been?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. You're getting serious again," she warned him.

He grinned. "I guess I am."

More people had begun to drift in. By the time they finished their drinks, all the other booths were filled. Jane was getting uneasy.

"Let's go somewhere else," she said abruptly, standing up.

Carr started to reply, but she had slipped around a couple approaching their booth and was striding toward the door. A fear took hold of him that she would get away like this afternoon and he would never see her again. He jerked a dollar bill from his pocketbook and dropped it on the table. With nettling rudeness the newcomers shoved past him and sat down. But there was no time to be sarcastic. Jane was already mounting the stairs. He ran after her.

She was waiting outside. He took her arm.

"Do people get on your nerves?" he asked, "so you can't stand being with too many of them for too long?"

She did not answer, but in the darkness her hand reached over and touched his.

Chapter VI

Don't let on you know the secret, even to yourself. Pretend you don't know that the people around you are dead, or as good as dead. That's what you'll do, brother, if you play it safe...

They emerged from the alley into a street where the air had an intoxicating glow, as if the lamps puffed out clouds of luminous dust which rose for three or four stories into the dark.

They passed a music store. Jane's walk slowed to an indecisive drift. Through the open door Carr glimpsed a mahogany expanse of uprights, spinets, baby grands. Jane suddenly walked in. The sound of their footsteps died as they stepped onto the thick carpet.

Whoever else was in the store was out of sight somewhere in the back. Jane sat down at one of the pianos. Her fingers quested for a while over the keys. Then her back stiffened, her head lifted, and there came the frantically rippling arpeggios of the third movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

She didn't play it any too well, yet she did manage to extract from it a feeling of wild, desperate wonder. Surely if the composer had evern meant this to be moonlight, it was moonlight illuminating a white-pinnacled ocean storm or, through rifts in ragged clouds, the Brocken on *Walpurgis Nacht*.

Suddenly it was over. In the

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echoing quiet Carr asked, "Is that more like it? The rhythm of life, I mean?"

She made a little grimace as she got up. "Still too nice," she said, "but there's a hint."

They started out. Carr looked back over his shoulder, but the store was still empty. He felt a twinge of returning fear.

"Do you realize that we haven't spoken with anybody but each other tonight?" he asked.

She smiled woefully. "I think of pretty dull things to do, don't I?" she said, and when he started to protest, "No, I'm afraid you'd have had a lot more fun tonight with some other girl."

"Listen," he said, "I did have a date with another girl and . . . oh, I don't want to talk about it."

Her voice was odd, almost close to tears. "You'd even have had more fun with Midge's girl-friend."

"Say, you do have a memory," he began. Then, turning on her, "Aren't you really Jane Gregg? Don't you know Tom Elvested and Midge?"

She shook her head reprovingly and looked up with an uneven smile. "But since you haven't got a date with anybody but me, Mr. Serious, you'll have to make the best of my antisocial habits. Let's see, I could let you look at some other girls undressing on North Clark or West Madison, or we could go to the symphony, or . . ."

They were passing the painfully bright lobby of a movie house, luridly placarded with yellow and purple swirls which seemed to have caught up in their whirlwind folds an unending rout or golden blondes, grim-eyed heroes, money bags, and grasping hands. Jane stopped.

"Or I could take you in here," she said.

He obediently veered toward the box office, but she kept hold of his arm and walked him past it into the outer lobby.

"You mustn't be scared of life," she told him, half gayly, half despairingly, he thought. "You must learn to take risks. You really can get away with anything."

Carr shrugged and held his breath for the inevitable.

The walked straight past the ticket-taker and through the center aisle door.

Carr puffed out his breath and grinned. He thought, maybe she knows someone here. Or else—who knows?—maybe you *could* get away with almost anything if you did it with enough assurance and picked the right moments.

The theater was only half full. They sidled through the blinking darkness into one of the empty rows at the back. Soon the gyrations of the gray shadows on the screen took on a little sense.

There were a man and a woman

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getting married, or else remarried after a divorce, it was hard to tell which. Then she left him because she thought that he was interested only in business. Then she came back, but he left her because he thought she was interested only in social affairs. Then he came back, but then they both left each other again, simultaneously.

From all around came the soft breathing and somnolent gum-chewing of drugged humanity.

Then the man and woman both raced to the bedside of their dying little boy, who had been tucked away in a military academy. But the boy recovered, and then the woman left both of them, for their own good, and a little while afterwards the man did the same thing. Then the boy left them.

"Do you play chess?" Jane asked suddenly.

Carr nodded gratefully.

"Come on," she said. "I know a place."

They hurried out of the bustling theater district into an empty region of silent gray office buildings—for the Loop is a strange place, where loneliness jostles too much companionship. Looking up at the dark and dingy heights, Carr felt his uneasiness begin to return. There was something exceedingly horrible in the thought of miles on miles of darkened offices, empty but for the endless desks, typewriters, filing cabinets, water coolers. What would a stranger from Mars deduce from them? Surely not human beings.

With a great roar a cavalcade of newspaper trucks careened across the next corner, plunging as frantically as if the fate of nations were at stake. Carr took a backward step, his heart pounding.

Jane smiled at him. "We're safe tonight," she said and led him to a massive office building of the last century. Pushing through a side door next to the locked revolving one, she drew him into a dingy lobby floored with tiny white tiles and surrounded by the iron lattice work of ancient elevator shafts. A jerkily revolving hand showed that one cage was still in operation, but Jane headed for the shadow-stifled stairs.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "It's thirteen stories, but I can't stand elevators."

Remembering the one at Marcia's apartment, Carr was glad.

They emerged panting in a hall where the one frosted door that wasn't dark read CAISSA CHESS CLUB.

Behind the door was a long room. A drab austerity, untidy rows of small tables, and a grimy floor littered with trodden cigarettes, all proclaimed the place to be the headquarters of a som-

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ber immovable monomania.

Some oldsters were playing near the door, utterly absorbed in the game. One with a dirty white beard was silently kibitzing, occasionally shaking his head, or pointing out with palsied fingers the move that would have won if it had been made.

Carr and Jane walked quietly beyond them, found a box of men as battered by long use as the half obliterated board, and started to play.

Soon the maddening, years-forgotten excitement gripped Carr tight. He was back in that dreadful little universe where the significance of things is narrowed down to the strategems whereby turreted rooks establish intangible walls of force, bishops, slip crafitly through bristling barricades, and knights spring out in sudden sidewise attacks, as if from crooked medieval passageways.

They played three slow, merciless games. She won the first two. He finally drew the third, his king just managing to nip off her last runaway pawn. It felt very late, getting on toward morning.

She leaned back massaging her face.

"Nothing like chess," she mumbled, "to take your mind off things." Then she dropped her hands.

Two men were still sitting at the first table in their overcoats, napping over the board. They tiptoed past them and out into the hall and went down the stairs. An old woman was wearily scrubbing her way across the lobby, her head bent as if forever.

In the street they paused uncertainly. It had grown quite chilly.

"Where do you live?" Carr asked.

"I'd rather you didn't—" Jane began and stopped. After a moment she said, "All right, you can take me home. But it's a long walk and you must still follow the leader."

The Loop was deserted except for the darkness and the hungry wind. They crossed the black Chicago River on Michigan Boulevard, where the skyscrapers are the thickest. It looked like the Styx. They walked rapidly. They didn't say anything. Carr's arm was tightly linked around hers. He felt sad and tired and yet very much at peace. He knew he was leaving this girl forever and going back to his own world. Any vague notion he'd had of making her a real friend had died in the cold ebb of night.

Yet at the same time he knew that she had helped him. All his worries and fears, including the big one, were gone. The events of the afternoon and early evening seemed merely bizarre, a mixture of hoaxes and trivial illusions.

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Tomorrow he must begin all over again, with his job and his pleasures. Marcia, he told himself, had only been playing a fantastic prank—he'd patch things up with her.

As if sensing his thoughts, Jane shrank close to his side.

Past the turn-off to his apartment, past the old white water tower, they kept on down the boulevard. It seemed tremendously wide without cars streaming through it.

They turned down a street where big houses hid behind black space and trees.

Jane stopped in front of a tall iron gate. High on one of the stone pillars, supporting it, too high for Jane to see, Carr idly noted a yellow chalk-mark in the shape of a cross with dots between the arms. Wondering if it were a tramps' sign commenting on the stinginess or generosity of the people inside, Carr suddenly got the picture his mind had been fumbling for all night. It fitted Jane, her untidy expensive clothes, her shy yet arrogant manner. She must be a rich man's daughter, overprotected, neurotic, futilely rebellious, tyrannized over by relatives and servants. Everything in her life mixed up, futilely and irremediably, in the way only money can manage.

"It's been so nice," Jane said in a choked voice, not looking at him, "so nice to pretend."

She fumbled in her pocket, but whether for a handkerchief or a key Carr could not tell. Something small and white slipped from her hand and fluttered through the fence. She pushed open the gate enough to get through.

"Please don't come in with me," she whispered. "And please don't stay and watch."

Carr thought he knew why. She didn't want him to watch the lights wink agitatedly on, perhaps hear the beginning of an anxious tirade. It was her last crumb of freedom—to leave him with the illusion she was free.

He took her in his arms. He felt in the darkness the tears on her cold cheek wetting his. Then she had broken away. There were footsteps running up a gravel drive. He turned and walked swiftly away.

In the sky, between the pale streets, was the first paleness of dawn.

Chapter VII

Keep looking straight ahead brother. It doesn't do to get too nosy. You may see things going on in the big engine that'll make you wish you'd never come alive...

Through slitted, sleep-heavy eyes Carr saw the clock holding up both hands in horror. The

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room was drenched in sunshine.

But he did not hurl himself out of bed, tear into his clothes, and rush downtown, just because it was half past eleven.

Instead he yawned and closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of self-confidence that filled him. He had a profound sense of being back on the right track.

Odd that a queer neurotic girl could give you so much. But nice.

Grinning, he got up and leisurely bathed and shaved.

He'd have breakfast downtown, he decided. Something a little special. Then amble over to the office about the time his regular lunch hour ended.

He even thought of permitting himself the luxury of taking a cab to the Loop. But as soon as he got outside he changed his mind. The sun and the air, and the blue of lake and sky, and the general feeling of muscle-stretching spring, when even old people crawl out of their holes, were too enticing. He felt fresh. Plenty of time. He'd walk.

The city showed him her best profile. As if he were a god briefly sojourning on earth, he found pleasure in inspecting the shifting scene and the passing people.

They seemed to feel as good as he did. Even the ones hurrying fastest somehow gave the impression of strolling. Carr enjoyed sliding past them like a stick drifiting in a slow, whimsical current.

If life has a rhythm, he thought, it has sunk to a lazy summer murmur from the strings.

His mind played idly with last night's events. He wondered if he could find Jane's imposing home again. He decided he probably could, but felt no curiosity. Already she was beginning to seem like a girl in a dream. They'd met, helped each other, parted. A proper episode.

He came to the bridge. Down on the sparkling river deckhands were washing an excursion steamer. The skyscrapers rose up clean and gray. Cities, he thought, could be lovely places at times, so huge and yet so bright and sane and filled with crowds of people among whom you were indistinguishable and therefore secure. Undoubtedly this was the pleasantest half-hour he'd had in months. To crown it, he decided he'd drop into one of the big department stores and make some totally unnecessary purchase. Necktie perhaps. Say a new blue.

Inside the store the crowd was thicker. Pausing to spy out the proper counter, Carr had the faintest feeling of oppressiveness. For a moment he felt the impulse to hurry outside. But he smiled at it. He located the neckties—they were across the huge room—and started toward them. But

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before he'd got halfway he stopped again, this time to enjoy a sight as humorously bizarre as a cartoon in *The New Yorker.*

Down the center aisle, their eyes fixed stonily ahead, avoiding the shoppers with a casual adroitness, marched four youngish men carrying a window-display mannequin. The four men were wearing identical light-weight black overcoats and black snap-brim hats which looked as if they'd just been purchased this morning. The two in front each held an ankle, the two in back a shoulder. The mannequin was dressed in an ultra-stylish olive green suit, the face and hands were finished in some realistic nude felt, and her arms were rigidly fixed to hold a teacup or an open purse.

There was something so ludicrous about the costume of the four men and their unconcern, both for the shoppers and for the figure they were carrying, that it was all Carr could do not to burst out laughing. As it was, he was relieved that none of the four men happened to look his way and catch his huge grin.

He studied them delightedly, wondering what weird circumstances had caused this bit of behind-the-scenes department-store business to take place in front of everyone.

Oddly, no one else seemed aware of how amusing they looked. It was something for Carr's funny-bone alone.

He watched until they were well past him. Almost regretfully, he turned away toward the tie counter. But just then the rigid arm of the mannequin unfolded and dropped down slackly, and the head fell back and the dark-lashed eyes flickered and fixed on him a sick, doomed stare.

Carr was not quite sure how he got out of the store without screaming or running. There was a blank space of panic in his memory. The next thing, he remembered clearly was pushing his way through the ocean of unseeing faces on State Street. By then he had begun to rationalize the event. Perhaps the mannequin's arm worked on a pivot, and its swinging down had startled him into imagining the rest. Of course the hand had looked soft and limp and helpless as it dragged along the floor, but that could have been imagination too.

After all, a world in which people could "turn off" other people like clockwork toys and cart them away just wasn't possible—even if it would help to explain some of the hundreds of mysterious disappearances that occur every month.

No, it had all been his damnable imagination. Just the same, his mood of calm self-confidence was shattered and he was tormented by a sudden sense of

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guilt about his lateness. He must get back to the office as quickly as he could. Behind his desk he'd find security.

The five blocks to General Employment seemed fifty. More than once he looked back uneasily. He found himself searching the crowd for black snap-brim hats.

He hurried furtively through the lobby and up the stairs. After hesitating a moment outside, he gathered his courage and entered the applicants' waiting room.

He looked through the glass panel. The big blonde who had slapped Jane was sitting in his swivel chair, rummaging through the drawers of his desk.

Chapter VIII

What's a mean guy do when he finds out other guys and girls are as good as dead? He trots out all the nasty notions he's been keeping warm inside his rotten little heart. Now I can get away with them, he figures . . .

Carr didn't move. His first impulse was to confront the woman, but right on its heels came the realization that she'd hardly be acting this way without some sort of authorization—and hardly obtain an authorization without good cause.

His mind, instinctively preferring realistic fears to worse ones, jumped back to a fleeting suspicion that Jane was mixed up in some sort of crime. This woman might be a detective.

But detectives didn't go around slapping people, at least not before they arrested them. Yet this woman had a distinctly professional look about her, bold as brass as she sat there going through his stuff.

On the other hand, she might have walked into the office without anyone's permission, trusting to bluff to get away with it.

Carr studied her through the glass pane. She was more beautiful than he'd realized yesterday. With that lush figure, faultless blonde hair, and challenging lips, she might be a model for billboard advertisements. Even the slight out-of-focus look of her eyes didn't spoil her attractiveness. And her gray sports outfit looked like five hundred dollars or so.

Yet there was something offkey about even her good looks and get-up. She carried the lush figure with a blank animal assurance. There was a startling and unashamed barbarousness in the two big silver pins piercing her mannish gray sports hat. And she seemed utterly unconcerned with the people around her. Carr felt strangely cowed.

But the situation was impossible, he told himself. You didn't

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let someone search your desk without objecting. Tom Elvested, apparently busy with some papers at the next desk, must be wondering what the devil the woman was up to. So must the others.

Just then she dropped a folder back, shut a drawer, and stood up, Carr faded back into the men's room. He waited perhaps fifteen seconds, then cautiously stepped out. The woman was no longer in sight. The outside corridor was empty. He ran to the head of the stairs and spotted the gray sports coat going through the revolving door. He hurried down the stairs, hesitated, then darted into the small tobacco and magazine store opening on the lobby. He could probably still catch a glimpse of her through the store's show window. It would be less conspicuous than dashing right out on the sidewalk.

The store was empty except for the proprietor and a rather portly and well-dressed man whose back was turned. The latter instantly attracted Carr's attention by a startlingly nervy action. Without a word or a glance at the proprietor, he leaned across the counter and selected a pack of cigarettes, tore it open from top to bottom with a twisting motion, selected one of the undamaged cigarettes and dropped the rest on the floor.

The proprietor didn't say anything.

Carr's snap-reaction was that at last he'd seen a big-shot racketeer following his true impulses. Then he followed the portly man's gaze to the street door and saw a patch of familiar gray approaching.

The lobby door was too far away. Carr sidled behind a magazine rack just as he heard the street door opening.

The first voice was the woman's. It was as disagreeably brassy as her manner. "I searched his desk. There wasn't anything suspicious."

"And you did a good job?" The portly man's voice was a jolly one. "Took your time? Didn't miss anything?"

"Of course."

"Hmm." Carr heard the whir of a lighter and the faint crackle of a cigarette igniting. His face was inches away from a line of luridly covered magazines.

"What are you so worried about?" The woman sounded quarrelsome. "Can't you take my word for it? I checked on them both yesterday. She didn't blink when I slapped her."

"Worry pays, Hackman." The portly man sounded even pleasanter. "We have strong reason to suspect the girl. We've seen her—or a very similar girl—with the small dark man with glasses. I respect your intelligence, Hackman, but I'm not completely satisfied. We'll do another check on

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the girl later tonight."

"Where?"

"But we don't even know if it's the same girl."

"Perhaps we can find out tonight. There may be photographs."

"Pft!" Now the woman was getting really snappish. "I think it's just your desire for her that keeps you doing these things. You hate to realize she's no use to you. You want to keep alive a dream."

The portly man chuckled. "Very often prudence and self-indulgence go hand in hand, Hackman. We'll do another check on her."

"But aren't we supposed to have any time for fun?"

"Fun must be insured, Hackman. Hardly be fun at all, if you felt someone might spoil it. And then if some other crowd should catch on to us through this girl . . . No, we'll do another check."

"Oh, all right!" The woman's voice expressed disgusted resignation. "Though I suppose it'll mean prowling around for hours with the hound."

"Hmm. No, I hardly think the hound will be necessary."

Carr, staring sightlessly at the pulp and astrology magazines and the bosomy paper-bound books, felt his flesh crawl.

"Why not let Dris do it?" he heard the woman suggest. "He's had the easiest end lately."

The portly man laughed dispassionately. "Do you think I'm going to let Dris work on the girl alone, when I'm the one who's to have her if it turns out she's a live one? And would you trust Dris in that situation?"

"Certainly! Dris wouldn't look at anyone but me!"

"Really?" The portly man's laughter was even colder. "I seem to recall you saying something of the sort about the small dark man with glasses."

The woman's answer was a cat-snarl that made Carr jerk. "Don't ever mention that filthy traitor to me again, Wilson! I can't sleep nights for thinking of giving him to the hound!"

"I respect your feelings, Hackman," the portly man said placatingly, "and I certainly applaud your plans for the chap, if we ever find him. But look here, facts are facts. I had you—and a very pleasant experience it was, Hackman. You had . . . er . . . the chap and then Dris. So in a sense you're one up on me—"

"I'll say I am!"

"—and so I want to be very sure that I'm the one who gets the next girl. Dris will have to wait a while before he's allowed a conquest."

"Dris will have no one but me! Ever!"

"Of course, Hackman, of course," the portly man buttered.

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Just then there was a rush of footsteps outside. Carr heard the street door open fast.

"What the devil is it, Dris?" the portly man managed to say before a new, hard voice blurted, "We've got to get out of here fast. I just saw the four men with black hats!"

There was a scramble of footsteps. The door closed. Carr peered around the rack. Through the window he could see the big blonde and the portly man entering a long black convertible. The driver was a young man with a crew haircut. As he opened the front door for the others, Carr saw that his right arm ended in a hooking contrivance. He felt a thrill of recognition. These were the people Jane had mentioned in her note, all right. ". . . affable-seeming older man . . ." Yes, it fitted.

The driver's hand and hook clamped on the wheel. The blonde, scrambling into the front seat ahead of the portly man, dangled her hand momentarily above the back seat. Something gray flashed up at it. The blonde jerked back her hand and made what might have been a threatening gesture. Carr felt a shiver crawling along his back. Perhaps the blonde had merely flicked up the corner of a gray fur driving robe. But it was almost summer and the gray flash had been very quick.

The convertible began to move swiftly. Carr hurried to the window. He got there in time to see the convertible swinging around the next corner, too fast for sensible downtown driving.

Carr returned. The proprietor was standing behind the counter, head bowed, busy—or pretending to be busy—with some printed forms.

He didn't go back to the window to look for them. He hurried out of the shop and got behind his desk as fast as he could. His mind was occupied by the two things he felt he must do. First, stick out the afternoon at the office. Second, get to Jane and warn her.

Just as he sat down at his desk, his phone rang.

It was Marcia. "Hello, darling," she said, "I'm going to do something I make it a rule never to do to a man."

"What's that?" he asked automatically.

"Thank him. It really was a lovely evening, dear. I've never know the food at the Kungsholm to be better."

"I don't get it," Carr said stupidly, remembering his flight from Marcia's apartment. "We didn't—"

"And then that charming fellow we met," Marcia interrupeted. "I mean Kirby Fisher. Darling, he seems to have oodles of money."

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"I don't get it at all—" Carr persisted and then stopped, frozen by a vision of Marcia and her invisible man and the three of them talking together, with gaps for the invisible man's remarks. For if yesterday's big fear were true and the world were a machine, and if he'd jumped out of his place in the machine when he ran away from Marcia last night to be with Jane—

"'Bye now, darling," Marcia said. "Be properly grateful."

"Wait a minute, Marcia," he said, speaking rapidly. "Do you actually mean—"

But the phone clicked and started to buzz, and Tom Elvested came galumphing over.

"Look," Tom said, "I know it was too short notice when I asked you to go out with me and Midge and Jane Gregg last night. But now you've seen what a charming girl she is, how about the four of us getting together Saturday?"

"Well . . ." Carr said confusedly, hardly knowing what Tom had been saying.

"Swell," Tom told him. "It's a date."

"Wait a minute, Tom," Carr said rapidly. "Is this Jane Gregg a slim girl with long untidy dark hair?"

But Tom had returned to his own desk, and an applicant was approaching Carr's.

Somehow Carr got through the afternoon. His mind kept jumping around in a funny way. He kept seeing the pulp magazines in the rack downstairs. For several minutes he was bothered by something gray poking around the end of one of the benches in the waiting room, until he realized it was a woman's handbag. And there was the constant fear that he'd lose contact with the people he was interviewing, that the questions and answers would stop agreeing.

With a slump of relief he watched the last applicant depart. It was a minute past quitting time and the other interviewers were already hurrying for their hats and wraps. His glance lit on a scrap of pencil by the wire basket on his desk. He rolled it toward him with one finger. It was fiercely chewed, making him think of nails bitten to the quick. He recognized it as Jane's. He rolled it back and forth.

He stood up. The office had emptied itself while he'd been sitting there. The cleaning woman, dry mop over her shoulder, was pushing in a cart for the wastepaper. She ignored him. He grabbed his hat and walked out past her, tramped down the stairs.

Outside the day had stayed sparklingly fair, so that the streets were flooded with a soft white light that imparted a subdued carnival atmosphere to the eager hurry of the rush hour. Carr felt a touch of dancing, ad-

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venturous excitement add itself to his tension. Instead of heading over to Michigan Boulevard, he took a more direct route north, crossing the sluggish river by one of the blacker, more nakedly-girdered bridges.

Beyond the river, the street slanted downward into a region of beaneries, secondhand magazine stores, small saloons, drugstores with screaming displays laid out six months ago. This kept up for some eight or ten blocks without much change except an increasing number of cramped nightclubs with tautly smiling photographs of the nearly naked girls who presumably dispensed the "continuous entertainment."

Then in one block, by the stern sorcery of zoning laws, the squalid neighborhood was transformed into a wealthy residential section of heavyset houses with thickly curtained windows and untrod lawns suggesting the cleared areas around forts.

If memory served him right, Jane's house lay just a block and a left turn ahead. He quickened his step. He rounded the corner.

He came to a high iron fence with brick pillars, to a tall iron gate. There was a yellow chalk-mark high on one pillar—a cross with dots between the arms.

He stopped dead, stared, took a backward step.

This couldn't be. He must have made a mistake.

But his memory of the gate—and especially of the chalk-mark—made that impossible.

The sinking sun suddenly sent a spectral yellow afterglow, illuminating everything clearly.

A gravel drive led up to just the sort of big stone mansion he had imagined—turreted, slate-roofed, heavy-eaved, in the style of the 1890's.

But the gate and fence were rusty, tall weeds encroached on the drive, lawn and flowerbeds were a wilderness, the upper windows were blank and curtainless, most of them broken, those on the first floor were boarded up, pigeon droppings whitened the somber brown stone, and in the center of the lawn, half hidden by the weeds, was a weather-bleached sign: FOR SALE.

Chapter IX

It doesn't do for too many people to come alive, brother. The big engine gets out of whack. And the mean guys don't want any competition. They get busy and rub it out . . .

Carr pushed doubtfully at the iron gate. It opened a couple of feet, then squidged to a stop against gravel still damp from yesterday morning's rain. He

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stepped inside, frowning. He was bothered by a vague and dream-like sense of recognition.

Suddenly he recalled the reason for it. He had seen pictures of this place in popular magazines, even read an article about it. It was the old Bedoes house, home of one of Chicago's most fabulous millionaires of the 1890's. John Claire Beddoes had been a pillar of society, but there were many persistent traditions about his secret vices. He was even supposed to have kept a young mistress in this very house for ten years under the eyes of his wife—though by what trickery or concealment, or sheer brazenness, was never explained.

But the house had been empty for the past twenty-five years. The magazine article had been very definite on that point. Its huge size and the fact that it was owned by an eccentric old maid, last of the Beddoes line, who lived on the Italian Riviera, had combined to make its sale impossible.

All this while Carr's feet were carrying him up the drive, which led back of the house, passing under a porte-cochere. He had almost reached it when he noticed the footprints.

They were a woman's, they were quite fresh, and yet they were sunk more deeply than his own. They must have been made since the rain. There were two sets, one leading toward the porte-cochere, the other back from it.

Looking at the black ruined flowerbeds, inhaling their dank odor, Carr was relieved that there were footprints.

He examined them more closely. Those leading toward the porte-cochere were deeper and more widely spaced. He remembered that Jane had been almost running.

But the most startling discovery was that the footprints apparently didn't enter the house at all. They clustered confusedly under the porte-cochere, then returned toward the gate. Evidently Jane had waited until he was gone, then retraced her steps.

He walked back to the gate. A submerged memory from last night was tugging at his mind. He looked along the iron fence. He noticed a scrap of paper lodged in the low back shoots of some leafless shrub.

He remembered something white fluttering from Jane's handbag in the dark, drifting through the fence.

He worked his way to it, pushing between the fence and the shrubbery. Unpruned shoots caught at his coat.

The paper was twice creased and the edges were yellowed and frayed, as if it had been carried around for a long time. It was not rain-marked. Unfolding it, he

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found the inside filled with a brown-inked script vividly recalling Jane's scribbled warning. Moving toward the center of the lawn to catch the failing light, he read:

Always keep up appearances.
Always be doing something.
Always be first or last.
Always be alone.
Always have a route of escape.
Never hesitate, or you're lost.
Never do anything odd—it wouldn't be noticed.
Never move things—it makes gaps.
Never touch anyone—DANGER! MACHINERY.
Never run—they're faster.
Never look at a stranger—it might be one of them.
Some animals are really alive.

Carr looked over his shoulder at the boarded-up house. A lean bird skimmed behind the roof. Somewhere down the block footsteps were clicking on concrete.

He considered the shape of the paper. It was about that of an envelope and the edges were torn. At first glance the other side seemed blank. Then he saw a faded postmark and address. He struck a match and, holding it close to the paper, made out the name—Jane Gregg; and the city —Chicago; and noticed that the postmark was at least a year old.

The address, lying in a crease, took him longer to decipher.

1924 Mayberry St.

The footsteps were closer. He looked up. Beyond the fence an elderly couple was passing. He guiltily whipped out the match, but they walked by without turning their heads. After a minute he slipped out and walked west.

The streetlights winked on. The leaves near the lights looked an artificial green. He walked faster.

The houses shouldered closer together, grew smaller, crept toward the street. The trees straggled, gave out, the grass sickened. Suddenly the houses coallesced, reached the sidewalk with a rush, shot up in towering brick combers, became the barracks of the middle classes.

His mind kept repeating a name. Jane Gregg. He'd half believed all along she was the girl loony Tom Elvested had talked about—the girl he'd made a date with, through Tom, this very afternoon.

A bent yellow street sign said, "Mayberry." He looked at the spotty gold numerals on the glass door of the first apartment. They were 1954-58. As he went down the street he had the feeling that he was walking back across the years.

The first floor of 1922-24 was lighted on the 24 side, except for a small dark sunporch. Behind one window he saw the edge of a red davenport and the head and

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shoulder of a gray-haired man in shirt-sleeves reading a newspaper. Inside the low-ceilinged vestibule he turned to the brass letter boxes on the 24 side. The first one read: "Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Gregg." After a moment he pushed the button, waited a moment, pushed it again.

He could hear the bell clearly, but there was no response, neither a mumble from the speaking tube, nor a buzz from the lock of the door to the stairs.

Yet the Gregg apartment ought to be the one in which he had seen the old man sitting.

He went outside. He craned his neck. The old man was still sitting there. An old man—perhaps deaf?

Then, as Carr watched, the old man put down his paper, settled back, looked across the room, and from the window came the opening triplets of the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata.

Carr felt the wire that fenced the tiny, nearly grassless plot press his calf, and realized that he had taken a backward step. He reminded himself that he'd heard Jane play only the third movement. He couldn't know she'd play the first just this way.

He went back into the vestibule, again pushed the button, heard the bell. The piano notes did not falter.

He peered once more through the inner door. A little light trickled down from the second floor landing above. He tried the door. Someone must have left it off the buzzer, for it opened.

He hurried past the blackness of the bottom of the stair well. Five steps, a turn, five steps more. Then, just as he reached the first landing, he felt something small and silent come brushing up agains his ankle from behind.

The next moment his back and hands were pressed to the plaster wall across the landing, where it was recessed about a foot.

Then he relaxed. Just a cat. A black cat. A black cat with a white throat and chest, like evening clothes.

And a very cool cat too, for his jump hadn't even fazed it. It walked suavely toward the door of the Gregg apartment.

But about two feet away it stopped. For several seconds it stood there, head upraised, making no movement except that its fur seemed to thicken a trifle. Then, very slowly, it looked around.

It stared at Carr.

Beyond the door, the piano started the sprightly second movement.

Carr edged out his hand. His throat felt dry and constricted. "Kitty," he croaked.

The cat arched its back, spat, made a twisting leap that carried it halway up the next semi-flight of stairs. It crouched on the top step, its bugged green eyes peer-

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ing down at him luminously.

One of the notes came back to Carr's mind: "Some animals are really alive."

There were footsteps. Carr shrank back into the recess. The door opened, the music suddenly swelled, and a gray-haired lady in a blue and white dress looked out and called, "Gigolo! Here, Gigolo!"

She had Jane's small chin and short straight nose, behind veils of plumpness. She was rather dumpy. Her face had a foolish look.

And she must be short-sighted, for although she looked up the stairs, she didn't see the cat, nor did she notice Carr. Feeling uncomfortably like a prowler, he started to step forward, then realized that she was so close he would give her a fright.

"Gigolo!" she called again. Then, to herself, "That cat!" A glance toward the dead bulb in the ceiling and a distracted headshake. "Gigolo!"

She backed inside. "I'm leaving it open, Gigolo," she called. "Come in when you want to."

Carr stepped out of the recess with a husky, "Excuse me," but the opening notes of the fast third movement drowned him out.

He crossed to the door. The green eyes at the top of the stairs followed him. He raised his hand to knock. But at the same time he looked through the half-open door, across a tiny hall, into the living room.

It was small, with too much furniture and too many lace runners and antimacassars. He could see the other end of the red davenport and the slippered feet of the old man sitting in it. The woman had returned to the straight-backed chair across the room and was sitting with her hands folded, her lips worriedly pursed.

Between them was the piano, an upright.

There was no one sitting at it.

To Carr, the rest of the room seemed to darken and curdle as he stared at the rippling keys.

Then he puffed out his breath. Of course, it must be some kind of electric player.

Again he started to knock, hesitated because they were listening to the music.

The woman moved uneasily on her chair. Her lips anxiously puckered and relaxed, like those of a fish behind aquarium glass. Finally she said, "Aren't you tiring yourself, dear? You've been at it for hours."

Carr looked toward the man, but he could see only the slippered feet. There was no reply.

The piano stopped. Carr took a step forward. But just then the woman got up. He expected her to do something to the mechanism, but instead she began

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to stroke the air a couple of feet above the piano bench.

Carr felt himself shivering.

"There, there, dear," she said, "that was very pretty, I know, but you're really spending too much time on your music. At your age a girl ought to be with other young people." She bent her head as if she were looking around the shoulder of someone seated at the piano, wagged her finger, and said, "Look at the circles under those eyes."

For Carr, time stopped, as if a clockworks universe hesitated before the next tick. In that frozen pause only his thoughts moved. It was true, then. Tom Elvested . . . The dumpy man . . . The room clerk . . . The Negress . . . Marcia in her bedroom . . . Last night with Jane—the bar, the music shop, the movie house, the chess players . . . The horizontal mannequin . . . The tobacconist . . . And now this old woman . . . All, all automatons, machines!

Or else (time moved again) this old woman was crazy.

Yes, that was it. Crazy. Behaving in her insanity as if her absent daughter were actually there. Believing it.

He clung to that thought.

"Really, Jane," the old woman was saying vapidly, "you must rest."

The slippered feet protruding from the davenport twisted. A weary voice said, "Now don't worry yourself over Jane, Mother."

The woman straightened. "Too much practicing is bad for anyone. It's undermining her health."

The davenport creaked. The man came into sight, not quite as old as Carr had guessed, but tired-looking. "Now, Mother, don't get excited," he said soothingly. "Everything's all right."

The father insane too, Carr thought. No, humoring her. Pretending to believe her hallucinations. That must be it.

"Everything isn't all right," she contradicted tearfully. "I won't have Jane practicing so much and taking those wild long walks by herself. Jane, you mustn't—" Suddenly a look of fear came over her. "Oh don't go. Please don't go, Jane." She stretched out her hand toward the hall as if to restrain someone. Carr shrank back. He felt sick. It was horrible that this mad old woman should resemble Jane.

She dropped her hand. "She's gone," she said and began to sob.

The old man put his arm around her shoulders. "You've scared her off," he said softly. "But don't cry, Mother. Tell you what, let's go sit in the dark for a while. It'll rest you." He urged her toward the sunporch. "Jane'll be back in a moment. I'm sure."

Just then, behind Carr, the

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cat hissed and retreated a few steps higher, the vestibule door downstairs was banged open, there were loud footsteps and voices raised in argument.

"I tell you, Hackman, I don't like it that Dris excused himself tonight."

"Show some sense, Wilson! This afternoon you didn't want him to come here at all."

"Not by himself, no. With us would be different."

"Pft! Do you always have to have the two of us in the audience when you chase girls?"

The first voice was cool and jolly, the second brassy. They were those Carr had overheard in the cigarette shop.

Before he had time to weigh his fears or form a plan, Carr had slipped through the door in front of him—Jane's parents were out of sight—tiptoed down the hallway leading to the back of the apartment, turned into the first room he came to, and was standing with his cheek to the wall, squinting back the way he had come.

He couldn't quite see the front door. But in a little while long shadows darkened the calcimine of the hallway.

"I came to check on her first, to chase her second," he heard Wilson say. "She doesn't seem to be around."

"But we just heard the piano and we know she's a music student." Practizes constantly."

"Use your head, Hackman! You know the piano would play whether she was here or not. If it plays when she's not here, that's the sort of proof we're looking for."

Carr waited for the footsteps or voices of Jane's parents. Surely they must be aware of the intruders. The sunporch wasn't that isolated.

Perhaps they were as terrified as he.

"She's probably wandered off to the back of the flat," Hackman suggested.

"Or hiding there," Wilson amended. "And there may be photographs. Let's look."

Carr was already retreating noiselessly across the fussy, old-fashioned bedroom toward where light poured into it from a white-tiled bathroom a short distance away.

"Stop! Listen!" Wilson called. "The sunporch!"

Footsteps receded down the hall, crossed the living room.

"It's the parents," he heard Hackman say in the distance. "I don't see the girl."

"Yet—listen to that!—they're talking as if she might be here."

The footsteps and voices started to come back.

"I told you I didn't like it when Dris bowed out, Hackman. This makes me more suspicious." For once the jolliness was absent from

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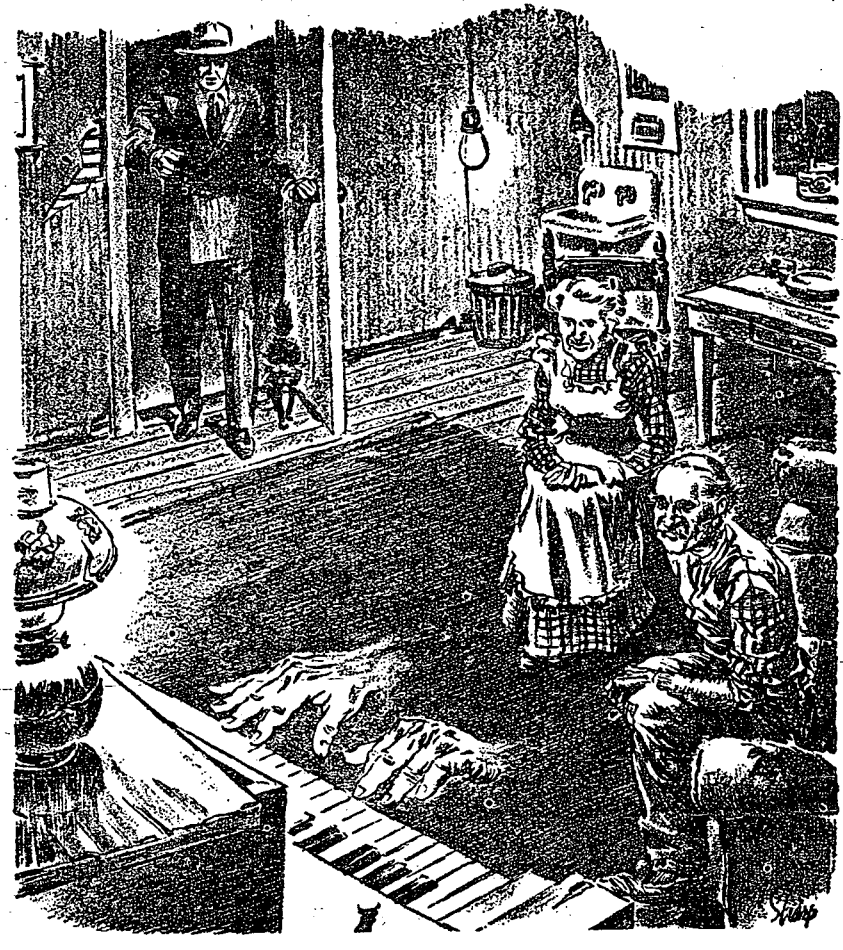

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Wilson's voice. "I wouldn't be surprised if he's got in ahead of me and taken the girl somewhere."

"Dris wouldn't dare do a thing like that!"

"No?" The jolliness came back into Wilson's voice, nastily. "Well, if he's not with her, he's fooling around with dead girls, you can bet."

"That's a dirty lie!" Hackman snarled. "Dris might fool around with dead girls when we're all having fun together. Naturally. But not by himself, not alone!"

"You think you're the whole show with him?"

"Yes! You're just jealous because I dropped you."

"Ha! I don't care what Dris—or you—do in your private lives. But if he's taking chances to cheat with this girl, when he knows that the four men in black hats are hunting for us, he's endangering us all. And if that's the case I'll erase him so fast that—*What's that?*"

Carr stiffened. Looking down he saw that he had knocked over a stupid little porcelain pekinese doorstop. He started for the bathroom door, but he had hardly taken the first painfully cautious step when he heard, from that direction, the faint sound of movement. He froze, then turned toward the hallway. He heard the stamp of high heels, a throaty exclamation of surprise from Wilson, a softly pattering rush, the paralyzing fighting-squall of a cat, a smash as if a cane or umbrella had been brought down on a table, and Wilson's, "Damn!"

Nex Carr caught a glimpse of Hackman. She had on a pearl gray evening dress, off the shoulders, and a mink wrap over her arm. She was coming down the hall, but she didn't see him.

At the same moment the cat Gigolo landed in the faultless hair, claws raking. Hackman screamed.

The ensuing battle was too quick for Carr to follow it clearly. Most of it was out of his sight, except for the shadows. Twice more the cane or umbrella smashed down, Wilson and Hackman yelled at each other, the cat squalled. Then Wilson shouted, "The door!" There was a final whanging blow, followed by, "Damn!"

For the next few moments, only heavy breahing from the hallway, then Hackman's voice, rising to a vindictive wail, "Bitch! Look what it did to my cheek. Oh, why must there be cats!"

Then Wilson, grimly businesslike: "It's trapped on the stairs. We can get it."

Hackman: "This wouldn't have happened if we'd brought the hound."

Wilson: "The hound! This afternoon you thought differently. Do you remember what happened

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the first time you brought the hound here? And do you remember what happened to Dris?"

Hackman: "It was his own fault that he got his hand snapped off. He shouldn't have teased it. Besides, the hound likes me.

Wilson: "Yes, I've seen him look at you and lick his chops. We're wasting time, Hackman. You'll have a lot more than a scratched cheek—or a snapped-off hand—to snivel about if we don't clear up this mess right away. Come on. To begin with, we've got to kill that cat."

Carr heard footsteps, then the sound of Wilson's voice growing fainter as he ascended the stairs, calling wheedlingly, "Here, kitty," and a few moments later Hackman's joined in with a sugariness that made Carr shake: "Here, kitty, kitty."

Carr tiptoed across the room and peered through the bathroom door. The white-tiled cubicle was empty, but beyond it he could see another bedroom that was smaller but friendlier. There was a littered dressing table with lamps whose little pink shades were awry. Beside that was a small bookcase overflowing with sheet music piled helter-skelter.

His heart began to pound as he crossed the bathroom's white tiles.

But there was something strange about the bedroom he was approaching. Despite the lively adolescent order, there was a museum feel to it, like some historic room kept just as its illustrious occupant had left it. The novel open face down on the dressing table was last year's best-seller.

He poked his head through the door. Something moved beside him and he quickly turned his head.

He had only a moment to look before the blackjack struck. But in that instant, before the cap of pain was pulled down over his eyes and ear, blacking out everything, he recognized his assailant.

The cords in the neck stood out, the cheeks were drawn back, exposing the big front teeth like those of a rat. Indeed the whole aspect—watery magnified eyes, low forehead, taut and spindle-limbed figure—was that of a cornered rat.

It was the small dark man with glasses.

Chapter X

I've told you to forget the secret, but I've got to admit that's a hard thing to do. Once a mind wakes up, it's got an itch to know the whole truth . . .

A black sea was churning in front of Carr, but he couldn't look out into it because there

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was a row of lights just a little way beyond his feet, so bright that they made his head ache violently. He danced about in pain, flapping his arms. It seemed a degrading thing to be doing, even if he were in pain so he tried to stop, but he couldn't.

Eventually his agonized prancing turned him around and he saw behind him a forest of dark shabby trees and between them glimpses of an unconvincing dingy gray sky. Then he whirled a little way farther and saw that Jane was beside him, dancing as madly as he. She still wore her sweater, but her skirt had become short and tight, like a flapper's, and there were bright pats of rouge on her cheeks. She looked floppy as a French doll.

The pain in his head lessened and he made a violent effort to stop his frantic dancing so he could go over and stop hers, but it was no use. Then for the first time he noticed thin black cords going up from his wrists and knees. He rolled his eyes and saw that there were others going up from his shoulders and head and the small of his back. He followed them up with his eyes and saw that they were attached to a huge wooden cross way up. A giant hand gripped the cross, making it waggle. Above it, filling the roof of the sky, was the ruddy face of Wilson.

Carr looked down quickly. He was thankful the footlights were so bright that he couldn't see anything of the silent audience.

Then a thin, high screaming started and the cords stopped tugging at him, so that at least he didn't have to dance. A steady pull on his ear turned his head slowly around, so that he was looking into the forest. The same thing was happening to Jane. The screaming grew and there bounded fantastically from the forest, the cords jerking him higher than his head, the puppet of the small dark man with glasses. His face was carved in an expression of rat-like fear. He fell in a disjointed heap at Carr's feet and pawed at Carr with his stiff hands. He kept gibbering something Carr couldn't understand. Every once in a while he would turn and point the way he had come and gibber the louder and scrabble the more frantically at Carr's chest.

Finally his backward looks became a comically terrified head-wagging and he resumed his flight, bounding off the stage in a single leap.

Carr and Jane continued to stare at the forest.

Then she said, in a high squeaking voice, "Oh save me!" and came tripping over to him and flung her corded arms loosely around his neck and he felt his jaw move on a string through his head and heard a falsetto voice that came from above reply, "I

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certainly will, my princess."

Then he pawed around on the ground as if he were hunting for something and she clung to him in a silly way, impeding his efforts. Finally a cord that went up his sleeve pulled a little sword into his hand. Then he saw something coming out of the forest, something that wasn't nice.

It was a very large hound, colored a little darker slate gray than the sky, with red eyes and a huge tusky jaw. But what was nasty about it as it came nosing through the trees was that, although there were cords attached to it at the proper points, they were all slack. It reached the edge of the forest and lifted its head and fixed its red eyes on them.

There followed a ridiculous battle in which the hound pretended to attack Carr and Jane, and he flailed about him with his sword. At one point the hound grabbed Jane's arm in its teeth and he poked at it, but it was all make-believe. Then he made a wilder lunge and the hound turned over on its back and pretended to die, but all the while its red eyes looked at him knowingly.

Then, as he and Jane embraced woodenly, the curtain swished down without the least applause from the silent audience, and he and Jane were twitched high into the air. A hand with red-lacquered nails as big as coal-shovels grabbed him and Hackman peered at him so closely that the pores of her skin were like smallpox pits.

"This little one looks as if it might be coming alive," she rumbled. The nails pinched his arm so cruelly that it was all he could do not to cry out.

"You're imagining things," came Wilson's voice like distant thunder. "Just like those black hats you thought you saw in the audience. What bothers me is that I can't find the little sword."

"Never mind," Hackman replied, and her breath was like a wind from rotting flowerbeds. "Dris will check on it."

"Dris!" Wilson boomed contemptuously. "Come on, put the puppet away."

"Very well," Hackman said, hanging Carr by his cords to a high hook. "But listen to me, little one," and she shook Carr until his teeth rattled. "If you ever come alive, I will give you to the hound!" She let him go. He swung and hit the wall so hard it knocked the breath out of him and he had to fight not to writhe.

With earthquake treadings and creakings, Wilson and Hackman went away. Carr looked cautiously to either side. To his left, a wooden shelf projected from the wall at about the level of his head. To his right Jane hung. Other dangling puppets were dark blobs beyond her.

Then Carr withdrew from his

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jacket the sword he had hidden there just before the curtain came down, and with it he cut the black cords attached to his knees, then all the others but those fixed to his wrists. He saw that Jane was watching him.

He tucked his sword in his belt and, gripping his wrist cords, pumped with his arms so that he was swinging back and forth along the wall. Soon the swings became so long that his feet were just missing the edge of the wooden shelf and he was soaring well above it. On the next swing he managed to catch hold of one of Jane's cords. It burned his hand as they careened wildly, but he held on until they came to rest.

Then came ticklish work. Supporting himself on Jane's cords, he cut his own last two, keeping hold of one of them and making a little loop at the bottom. Setting his foot in this stirrup, he took Jane around the waist. He hooked his other arm around the stirrup-string, drew his sword with that arm, and cut all of Jane's cords. As the last one parted, he felt she was no longer a limp puppet slung over his arm, but a tiny living woman.

Next moment they were swinging through space. He let the sword fall and clung to the string with that hand. And now he realized that the shortened string was carrying them too high. He let go his hand, kicking loose with his foot, and dropped with Jane. They landed on the edge of the shelf with a breath-taking jar, just managed to wriggle to safety with stomach and knee.

Then they were running along the shelf. From that they dropped to the top of a book case, to a table, to a chair and so to the floor. Ahead of them was a huge door, slightly ajar. Carr knew it led to safety.

But at that moment there began a high thin screaming. Looking back, Carr saw that it came from the puppet of the small dark man with glasses, who had been hanging beyond Jane.

"You wouldn't take me," he screamed.

And now other sounds could be heard—giant footsteps.

Grabbing Jane's wrist, Carr sprinted toward the door, but to his dismay he found that his legs were becoming wobbly. He prayed for strings to make them move. Furthermore, the floor was acquiring an oddly yielding texture. It was as if he and Jane, rubber-jointed, were trying to run through through piled hay.

The screaming became earsplitting.

Throwing back a quick glance over his shoulder, Carr saw the angry faces of Wilson and Hackman careening toward him like huge red balloons.

But much nearer, in fact just at his heels, bounded the hound.

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Tucked back between its slavering jaws was a bitten-off hand.

Carr made one last effort to increase his speed. He sprawled headlong on the billowy floor.

He felt stiff paws on his back, pinning him down. He squirmed around and grappled feebly. The screaming continued.

But then the hound seemed to collapse, to crumple under his fingers. Hitching himself up, he realized that he was in his own room, in his own bed, fighting the bedclothes, and that the screaming in his ears was the siren of a passing fire engine.

He shakily thrust his feet out of bed and sat on the edge of it, waiting for the echoes of his nightmare to stop swirling through his senses.

His head ached miserably. Lifting his hand, he felt a large sensitive lump. He recalled the small dark man hitting him, though the memory was still mixed up with the dream-betrayal.

Pale light was sifting through the window. He went over to the bureau, opened the top drawer. He looked at the three pint bottles of whisky. He chose the quarter full one, poured himself a drink, downed it, poured himself another, looked around.

The clothes he had been wearing were uncharacteristically laid out on a chair.

His head began to feel less like a whirlpool. He went over and looked out the window. The pale light was not that of dawn, but gathering evening. Unwillingly he decided that he had been unconscious not only last night, but also all of today.

A coolness on his fingers told him that whisky was dribbling out of the shot glass. He drank it and turned around. A gust of anger at the small dark man (may be your friend!) went through him.

Just then he noticed a blank envelope propped on the mantlepiece. He took it down, snapped on a light, opened it, unfolded the closely scribbled note it contained. It was from Jane.

You're in danger, Carr, terrible danger. Don't stir out of your room today. Stay away from the window. Don't answer if anyone knocks.

I'm terribly sorry about last night. My friend is sorry too, now that he knows who you are. He thought you were with Wilson and Hackman, so his attack on you was excusable. We would stay with you longer, but our mere presence would mean too much danger for you. My friend says you'll come out of it okay.

I'm sorry that I can't explain things more. But it's better for you not to know too much.

Don't try to find me, Carr. It isn't only that you'd risk your own life. You'd endanger mine.

(Continued on page 114)

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BREAKFAST AT TWILIGHT

BY PHILIP K. DICK

New Algis Budrys stories are pretty hard to come by these days—especially since Rogue Moon *just missed taking a Hugo back in 1960—but at least we can offer you a vintage short you may have missed, a tale of doom stripped down to its essentials—to a castaway, a cat, and the cruel sea waiting to devour them both!*

"DAD?" Earl asked, hurrying out of the bathroom, "you going to drive us to school today?"

Tim McLean poured himself a second cup of coffee. "You kids can walk for a change. The car's in the garage."

Judy pouted. "It's raining."

"No it isn't," Virginia corrected her sister. She drew the shade back. "It's all foggy, but it isn't raining."

"Let me look." Mary McLean dried her hands and came over from the sink. "What an odd day. Is that fog? It looks more like smoke. I can't make out a thing. What did the weather man say?"

"I couldn't get anything on the radio," Earl said. "Nothing but static."

Tim stirred angrily. "That darn thing on the blink again? Seems like I just had it fixed." He got up and moved sleepily over to the radio. He fiddled idly with the dials. The three children hurried back and forth, getting ready for school. "Strange," Tim said.

"I'm going." Earl opened the front door.

"Wait for your sisters," Mary ordered absently.

"I'm ready," Virginia said. "Do I look all right?"

"You look fine," Mary said, kissing her.

"I'll call the radio repair place from the office," Tim said.

He broke off. Earl stood at the kitchen door, pale and silent, his eyes wide with terror.

"What is it?"

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"I—I came back."

"What is it?" Are you sick?"

"I can't go to school."

They stared at him. "What is wrong?" Tim grabbed his son's arm. "Why can't you go to school?"

"They—they won't let me."

"Who?"

"The soldiers."

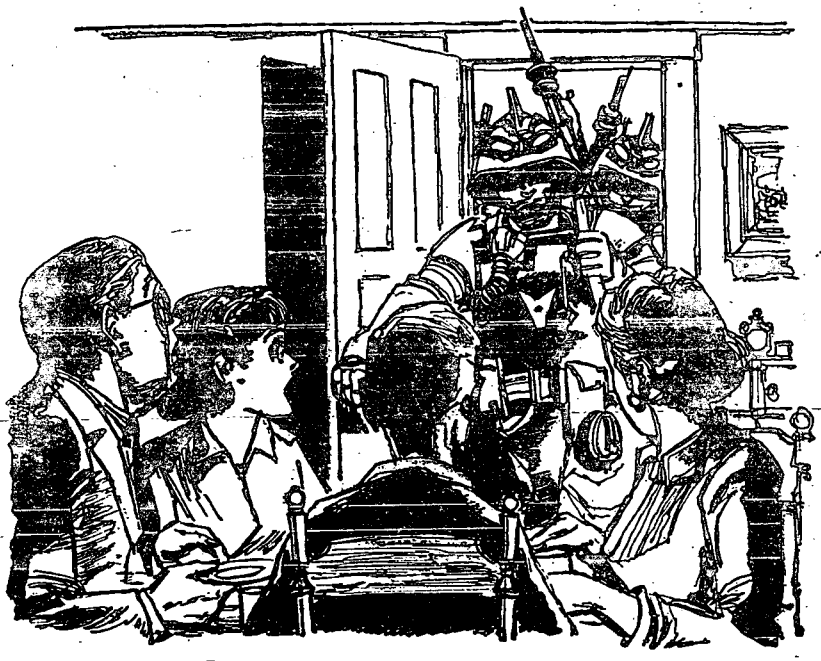
It came tumbling out with a rush. "They're all over. Soldiers and guns. And they're coming here."

"Coming? Coming here?" Tim echoed, dazed.

"They're coming here and they're going to—" Earl broke off, terrified. From the front porch came the sound of heavy boots. A crash. Splintering wood. Voices.

"Good Lord," Mary gasped. "What is it, Tim?"

Tim entered the living room, his heart laboring painfully. Three men stood inside the door. Men in gray-green uniforms, weighted with guns and complex tangles of equipment. Tubes and hoses. Meters on thick cords. Boxes and leather straps and antennae. Elaborate masks locked over



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their heads. Behind the masks Tim saw tired, whisker-stubbled faces, red-rimmed eyes that gazed at him in brutal displeasure.

One of the soldiers jerked up his gun, aiming at McLean's middle. Tim peered at it dumbly. *The gun.* Long and thin. Like a needle. Attached to a coil of tubes.

"What in the name of—' he began, but the soldier cut him savagely off.

"Who are you?" His voice was harsh, guttural. "What are you doing here?" He pushed his mask aside. His skin was dirty. Cuts and pocks lined his sallow flesh. His teeth were broken and missing.

"Answer!" a second soldier demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"Show your blue card," the third said. "Let's see your Sector number." His eyes strayed to the children and Mary standing mutely at the dining room door. His mouth fell open.

"A woman!"

The three soldiers gazed in disbelief.

"What the hell is this?" the first demanded. "How long has this woman been here?"

Tim found his voice. "She's my wife. What is this? What—"

"Your *wife?"* They were incredulous.

"My wife and children. For God's sake—"

"Your wife? And you'd bring her here? You must be out of your head!"

"He's got ash sickness," one said. He lowered his gun and strode across the living room to Mary. "Come on, sister. You're coming with us."

Tim lunged.

A wall of force hit him. He sprawled, clouds of darkness rolling around him. His ears sang. His head throbbed. Everything receded. Dimly, he was aware of shapes moving. Voices. The room. He concentrated.

The soldiers were herding the children back. One of them grabbed Mary by the arm. He tore her dress away, ripping it from her shoulders. "Gee," he snarled. "He'd bring her here, and she's not even stung!"

"Take her along."

"Okay, Captain." The soldier dragged Mary toward the front door. "We'll do what we can with her."

"The kids." The captain waved the other soldier over with the children. "Take them along. I don't get it. No masks. No cards. How'd this house miss getting hit? Last

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night was the worst in months!"

Tim struggled painfully to his feet. His mouth was bleeding. His vision blurred. He hung on tight to the wall. "Look," he muttered. "For God's sake—"

The captain was staring into the kitchen. "Is that—is that *food?*" He advanced slowly through the dining room. "Look!"

The other soldiers came after him, Mary and the children forgotten. They stood around the table, amazed.

"Look at it!"

"Coffee." One grabbed up the pot and drank it greedily down. He choked, black coffee dripping down his tunic. "Hot. Jeeze. Hot coffee."

"Cream!" Another soldier tore open the refrigerator. "Look. Milk. Eggs. Butter. Meat." His voice broke. "It's full of food."

The captain disappeared into the pantry. He came out, lugging a case of canned peas. "Get the rest. Get it all. We'll load it in the snake."

He dropped the case on the table with a crash. Watching Tim intently, he fumbled in his dirty tunic until he found a cigarette. He lit it slowly, not taking his eyes from Tim. "All right," he said. "Let's hear what you have to say."

Tim's mouth opened and closed. No words came. His mind was blank. Dead. He couldn't think.

"This food. Where'd you get it? And these things." The captain waved around the kitchen. "Dishes. Furniture. How come this house hasn't been hit? How did you survive last night's attack?"

"I—" Tim gasped.

The captain came toward him ominously. "The woman. And the kids. All of you. What are you doing here?" His voice was hard. "You better be able to explain, mister. You better be able to explain what you're doing here—or we'll have to burn the whole damn lot of you."

Tim sat down at the table. He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to focus his mind. His body ached. He rubbed blood from his mouth, conscious of a broken molar and bits of loose tooth. He got out a handkerchief and spat the bits into it. His hands were shaking.

"Come on," the captain said.

Mary and the children slipped into the room. Judy was crying. Virginia's face was blank with shock. Earl stared wide-eyed at the soldiers, his face white.

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"Tim," Mary said, putting her hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

Tim nodded. "I'm all right."

Mary pulled her dress around her. "Tim, they can't get away with it. Somebody'll come. The mailman. The neighbors. They can't just—"

"Shut up," the captain snapped. His eyes flickered oddly. "The mailman? What are you talking about?" He held out his hand. "Let's see your yellow slip, sister."

"Yellow slip?" Mary faltered.

The captain rubbed his jaw. "No yellow slip. No masks. No cards."

"They're geeps," a soldier said.

"Maybe. And maybe not."

"They're geeps, Captain. We better burn 'em. We can't take any chances."

"There's something funny going on here," the captain said. He plucked at his neck, lifting up a small box on a cord. "I'm getting a polic here."

"A polic?" A shiver moved through the soldiers. "Wait, Captain. We can handle this. Don't get a polic. He'll put us on 4 and then we'll never—"

The captain spoke into the box. "Give me Web B."

Tim looked up at Mary. "Listen, honey. I—"

"Shut up." A soldier prodded him. Tim lapsed into silence.

The box squawked. "Web B."

"Can you spare a polic? We've run into something strange. Group of five. Man, woman, three kids. No masks, no cards, the woman not stung, dwelling completely intact. Furniture, fixtures, and about two hundred pounds of food."

The box hesitated. "All right. Polic on his way. Stay there. Don't let them escape."

"I won't." The captain dropped the box back in his shirt. "A polic will be here any minute. Meanwhile, let's get the food loaded."

From outside came a deep thundering roar. It shook the house, rattling the dishes in the cupboard.

"Jeez," a soldier said. "That was close."

"I hope the screens hold until nightfall." The captain grabbed up the case of canned peas. "Get the rest. We want it loaded before the polic comes."

The two soldiers filled their arms and followed him through the house, out the front door. Their voices diminished as they strode down the path.

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Tim got to his feet. "Stay here," he said thickly.

"What are you doing?" Mary asked nervously.

"Maybe I can get out." He ran to the back door and unlatched it, hands shaking. He pulled the door wide and stepped out on the back porch. "I don't see any of them. If we can only . . ."

He stopped.

Around him gray clouds blew. Gray ash, billowing as far as he could see. Dim shapes were visible. Broken shapes, silent and unmoving in the grayness.

Ruins.

Ruined buildings. Heaps of rubble. Debris everywhere. He walked slowly down the back steps. The concrete walk ended abruptly. Beyond it, slag and heaps of rubble were strewn. Nothing else. Nothing as far as the eye could see.

Nothing stirred. Nothing moved. In the gray silence there was no life. No motion. Only the clouds of drifting ash. The slag and the endless heaps.

The city was gone. The buildings were destroyed. Nothing remained. No people. No life. Jagged walls, empty and gaping. A few dark weeds growing among the debris. Tim bent down, touching a weed. Rough, thick stalk. And the slag. It was metal slag. Melted metal. He straightened up—

"Come back inside," a crisp voice said.

He turned numbly. A man stood on the porch behind him, hands on his hips. A small man, hollow-cheeked. Eyes small and bright, like two black coals. He wore a uniform different from the soldiers'. His mask was pushed back, away from his face. His skin was yellow, faintly luminous, clinging to his cheek bones. A sick face, ravaged by fever and fatigue.

"Who are you?" Tim said.

"Douglas. Political Commissioner Douglas."

"You're—you're the polic," Tim said.

"That's right. Now come inside. I expect to hear some answers from you. I have quite a few questions."

"The first thing I want to know," Commissioner Douglas said, "is how this house escaped destruction."

Tim and Mary and the children sat together on the couch, silent and unmoving, faces blank with shock.

"Well?" Douglas demanded.

Tim found his voice. "Look," he said. "I don't

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know. I don't know anything. We woke up this morning like every other morning. We dressed and ate breakfast—"

"It was foggy out," Virginia said. "We looked out and saw the fog."

"And the radio wouldn't work," Earl said.

"The radio?" Douglas' thin face twisted. "There haven't been any audio signals in months. Except for government purposes. This house. All of you. I don't understand. If you were geeps—"

"Geeps. What does that mean?" Mary murmured.

"Soviet general-purpose troops."

"Then the war has begun."

"North America was attacked two years ago," Douglas said. "In 1958."

Tim sagged. "1958. Then this is 1960." He reached suddenly into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet and tossed it to Douglas. "Look in there."

Douglas opened the wallet suspiciously. "Why?"

"The library card. The parcel receipts. Look at the dates." Tim turned to Mary. "I'm beginning to understand now. I had an idea when I saw the ruins."

"Are we winning?" Earl piped.

Douglas studied Tim's wallet intently. "Very interesting. These are all old. Seven and eight years." His eyes flickered. "What are you trying to say? That you came from the past? That you're time travelers?"

The captain came back inside. "The snake is all loaded, sir."

Douglas nodded curtly. "All right. You can take off with your patrol."

The captain glanced at Tim. "Will you be—"

"I'll handle them."

The captain saluted. "Fine, sir." He quickly disappeared through the door. Outside, he and his men climbed aboard a long thin truck, like a pipe mounted on treads. With a faint hum the truck leaped forward.

In a moment only gray clouds and the dim outline of ruined buildings remained.

Douglas paced back and forth, examining the living room, the wall paper, the light fixtures and chairs. He picked up some magazines and thumbed through them. "From the past. But not far in the past."

"Seven years."

"Could it be? I suppose. A lot of things have happened in the last few months. Time travel." Douglas grinned ironically. "You picked a bad

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spot, McLean. You should have gone farther on."

"I didn't pick it. It just happened."

"You must have done *something*."

Tim shook his head. "No. Nothing. We got up. And we were—here."

Douglas was deep in thought. "Here. Seven years in the future. Moved forward through time. We know nothing about time travel. No work has been done with it. There seem to be no evident military possibilities."

"How did the war begin?" Mary asked faintly.

"Begin? It didn't begin. You remember. There was war seven years ago."

"The real war. This."

"There wasn't any point when it became—this. We fought in Korea. We fought in China. In Germany and Jugoslavia and Iran. It spread, farther and farther. Finally the bombs were falling here. It came like the plague. The war *grew*. It didn't begin." Abruptly he put his notebook away. "A report on you would be suspect. They might think I had the ash sickness."

"What's that?" Virginia asked.

"Radio-active particles in the air. Carried to the brain. Causes insanity. Everybody has a touch of it, even with the masks."

"I'd sure like to know who's winning," Earl repeated. "What was that outside? That truck. Was it rocket propelled?"

"The snake? No. Turbines. Boring snout. Cuts through the debris."

"Seven years," Mary said. "So much has changed. It doesn't seem possible."

"So much?" Douglas shrugged. "I suppose so. I remember what I was doing seven years ago. I was still in school. Learning. I had an apartment and a car. I went out dancing. I bought a TV set. But these things were there. The twilight. This. Only I didn't know. None of us knew. But they were there."

"You're a Political Commissioner?" Tim asked.

"I supervise the troops. Watch for political deviation. In a total war we have to keep people under constant surveillance. One Commie down in the Webs could wreck the whole business. We can't take chances."

Tim nodded. "Yes. It was there. The twilight. Only we didn't understand it."

Douglas examined the books in the bookcase. "I'll

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take a couple of these along. I haven't seen fiction in months. Most of it disappeared. Burned back in '57."

"Burned?"

Douglas helped himself. "Shakespeare. Milton. Dryden. I'll take the old stuff. It's safer. None of the Steinbeck and Dos Passos. Even a polic can get in trouble. If you stay here, you better get rid of *that*." He tapped a volume of Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

"If we stay! What else can we do?"

"You want to stay?"

"No," Mary said quietly.

Douglas shot her a quick glance. "No, I suppose not. If you stay you'll be separated, of course. Children to the Canadian Relocation Centers. Women are situated down in the undersurface factory-labor camps. Men are automatically a part of Military."

"Like those three who left," Tim said.

"Unless you can qualify for the id block."

"What's that?"

"Industrial designing and Technology. What training have you had? Anything along scientific lines?"

"No. Accounting."

Douglas shrugged. "Well, you'll be given a standard test. If your IQ is high enough you could go in the Political Service. We use a lot of men." He paused thoughtfully, his arms loaded with books. "You better go back, McLean. You'll have trouble getting accustomed to this. I'd go back, if I could. But I can't."

"Back?" Mary echoed. "How?"

"The way you came."

"We just—came."

Douglas halted at the front door. "Last night was the worst rom attack so far. They hit this whole area."

"Rom?"

"Robot operated missiles. The Soviets are systematically destroying continental America, mile by mile. Roms are cheap. They make them by the million and fire them off. The whole process is automatic. Robot factories turn them out and fire them at us. Last night they came over here—waves of them. This morning the patrol came in and found nothing. Except you, of course."

Tim nodded slowly. "I'm beginning to see."

"The concentrated energy must have tipped some unstable time-fault. Like a rock fault. We're always starting earthquakes. But a *time quake* . . . Interesting. That's

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what happened, I think. The release of energy, the destruction of matter, sucked your house into the future. Carried the house seven years ahead. This street, everything here, this very spot, was pulverized. Your house, seven years back, was caught in the undertow. The blast must have lashed back through time."

"Sucked into the future," Tim said. "During the night. While we were asleep."

Douglas watched him carefully. "Tonight," he said, "there will be another rom attack. It should finish off what is left." He looked at his watch. "It is now four in the afternoon. The attack will begin in a few hours. You should be undersurface. Nothing will survive up here. I can take you down with me, if you want. But if you want to take a chance, if you want to stay here—"

"You think it might tip us back?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's a gamble. It might tip you back to your own time, or it might not. If not—"

"If not we wouldn't have a chance of survival."

Douglas flicked out a pocket map and spread it open on the couch. "A patrol will remain in this area another half hour. If you decide to come undersurface with us, go down this street this way." He traced a line on the map. "To this open field here. The patrol is a Political unit. They'll take you the rest of the way down. You think you can find the field?"

"I think so," Tim said, looking at the map. His lips twisted. "That open field used to be the grammar school my kids went to. That's where they were going when the troops stopped them. Just a little while ago."

"Seven years ago," Douglas corrected. He snapped the map shut and restored it to his pocket. He pulled his mask down and moved out the front door onto the porch. "Maybe I'll see you again. Maybe not. It's your decision. You'll have to decide one way or the other. In any case—good luck."

He turned and walked briskly away from the house.

"Dad?" Earl shouted, "are you going in the Army? Are you going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns?" His eyes sparkled with excitement. "Are you going to drive a *snake?*"

Tim McLean squatted down and pulled his son to

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him. "You want that? *You want to stay here?* If I'm going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns we can't go back."

Earl looked doubtful. "Couldn't we go back later?"

Tim shook his head. "Afraid not. We've got to decide now, whether we're going back or not."

"You heard Mr. Douglas," Virginia said disgustedly. "The attack's going to start in a couple of hours."

Tim got to his feet and paced back and forth. "If we stay in the house we'll get blown to bits. Let's face it. There's only a faint chance we'll be tipped back to our own time. A slim possibility—a long shot. Do we want to stay here with roms falling all around us, knowing any second it may be the end—hearing them come closer, hitting nearer—lying on the floor, waiting, listening—"

"Do you really want to go back?" Mary demanded.

"Of course, but the risk—"

"I'm not asking you about the risk. I'm asking you if you really want to go back. Maybe you want to stay here. Maybe Earl's right. You in a uniform and a mask, with one of those needle guns. Driving a snake."

"With you in a factory-labor camp! And the kids in a Government Relocation Center! How do you think that would be? What do you think they'd teach them? What do you think they'd grow up like? And believe . . ."

"They'd probably teach them to be very useful."

"Useful! To what? To themselves? To mankind? Or to the war effort . . ."

"They'd be alive," Mary said. "They'd be safe. This way, if we stay in the house, wait for the attack to come—"

"Sure," Tim grated. "They would be alive. Probably quite healthy. Well, fed. Well-clothed and cared for." He looked down at his children, his face hard. "They'd stay alive, all right. They'd live to grow up and become adults. But what kind of adults? You heard what he said! Book burnings in '57. What'll they be taught from? What kind of ideas are left, since '57? What kind of beliefs can they get from a Government Relocation Center? What kind of values will they have?"

"There's the id block," Mary suggested.

"Industrial designing and Technocracy. For the bright ones. The clever ones with imagination. Busy slide-

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rules and pencils. Drawing and planning and making discoveries. The girls could go into that. They could design the guns. Earl could go into the Political Service. He could make sure the guns were used. If any of the troops deviated, didn't want to shoot, Earl could report them and have them hauled off for reeducation. To have their political faith strengthened—in a world where those *with* brains design weapons and those *without* brains fire them."

"But they'd be alive," Mary repeated.

"You've got a strange idea of what being alive is! You call that alive? Maybe it is." Tim shook his head wearily. "Maybe you're right. Maybe we should go undersurface with Douglas. Stay in this world. Stay alive."

"I didn't say that," Mary said softly. "Tim, I had to find out if you *really* understood why it's worth it. Worth staying in the house, taking the chance we won't be tipped back."

"Then you want to take the chance?"

"Of course! We *have* to. We can't turn our children over to them—to the Relocation Center. To be taught how to hate and kill and destroy." Mary smiled up wanly. "Anyhow, they've always gone to the Jefferson School. And here, in this world, it's only an open field."

"Are we going back?" Judy piped. She caught hold of Tim's sleeve imploringly. "Are we going back now?"

Tim disengaged her arm. "Very soon, honey."

Mary opened the supply cupboards and rooted in them. "Everything's here. What did they take?"

"The case of canned peas. Everything we had in the refrigerator. And they smashed the front door."

"I'll bet we're beating them!" Earl shouted. He ran to the window and peered out. The sight of the rolling ash disappointed him. "I can't see anything! Just the fog!" He turned questioningly to Tim. "Is it always like this, here?"

"Yes," Tim answered.

Earl's face fell. "Just fog? Nothing else? Doesn't the sun shine ever?"

"I'll fix some coffee," Mary said.

"Good." Tim went into the bathroom and examined himself in the mirror. His mouth was cut, caked with dried blood. His head ached. He felt sick at his stomach.

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"It doesn't seem possible," Mary said, as they sat down at the kitchen table.

Tim sipped his coffee. "No. It doesn't." Where he sat he could see out the window. The clouds of ash. The dim, jagged outline of ruined buildings.

"Is the man coming back?" Judy piped. "He was all thin and funny-looking. He isn't coming back, is he?"

Tim looked at his watch. It read ten o'clock. He reset it, moving the hands to four-fifteen. "Douglas said it would begin at night-fall. That won't be long."

"Then we're really staying in the house," Mary said.

"That's right."

"Even though there's only a little chance?"

"Even though there's only a little chance we'll get back. Are you glad?"

"I'm glad," Mary said, her eyes bright. "It's worth it, Tim. You know it is. Anything's worth it, any chance. *To get back.* And something else. We'll all be here together . . . We can't be—broken up. Separated."

Tim poured himself more coffee. "We might as well make ourselves comfortable. We have maybe three hours to wait. We might as well try to enjoy them."

At six-thirty the first rom fell. They felt the shock, a deep rolling wave of force that lapped over the house.

Judy came running from the dining room, face white with fear. "Daddy! What is it?"

"Nothing. Don't worry."

"Come on back," Virginia called impatiently. "It's your turn." They were playing Monopoly.

Earl leaped to his feet. "I want to see." He ran excitedly to the window. "I can see where it hit!"

Tim lifted the shade and looked out. Far off, in the distance, a white glare burned fitfully. A towering column of luminous smoke rose from it.

A second shudder vibrated through the house. A dish crashed from the shelf, into the sink.

It was almost dark outside. Except for the two spots of white Tim could make out nothing. The clouds of ash were lost in the gloom. The ash and the ragged remains of buildings.

"That was closer," Mary said.

A third rom fell. In the living room the windows burst, showering glass across the rug.

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"We better get back," Tim said.

"Where?"

"Down in the basement. Come on." Tim unlocked the basement door and they trooped nervously downstairs.

"Food," Mary said. "We better bring the food that's left."

"Good idea. You kids go on down. We'll come along in a minute."

"I can carry something," Earl said.

"Go on down." The fourth rom hit, farther off than the last. "And stay away from the window."

"I'll move something over the window," Earl said. "The big piece of plywood we used for my train."

"Good idea." Tim and Mary returned to the kitchen. "Food. Dishes. What else?"

"Books." Mary looked nervously around. "I don't know. Nothing else. Come on."

A shattering roar drowned out her words. The kitchen window gave, showering glass over them. The dishes over the sink tumbled down in a torrent of breaking china. Tim grabbed Mary and pulled her down.

From the broken window rolling clouds of ominous gray drifted into the room. The evening air stank, a sour, rotten smell. Tim shuddered.

"Forget the food. Let's get back down."

"But—"

"Forget it." He grabbed her and pulled her down the basement stairs. They tumbled in a heap, Tim slamming the door after them.

"Where's the food?" Virginia demanded.

Tim wiped his forehead shakily. "Forget it. We won't need it."

"Help me," Earl gasped. Tim helped him move the sheet of plywood over the window above the laundry tubs. The basement was cold and silent. The cement floor under them was faintly moist.

Two roms struck at once. Tim was hurled to the floor. The concrete hit him and he grunted. For a moment blackness swirled around him. Then he was on his knees, groping his way up.

"Everybody all right?" he muttered.

"I'm all right," Mary said. Judy began to whimper. Earl was feeling his way across the room.

"I'm all right," Virginia said. "I guess."

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The lights flickered and dimmed. Abruptly they went out. The basement was pitch black.

"Well," Tim said. "There they go."

"I have my flashlight." Earl winked the flashlight on. "How's that?"

"Fine," Tim said.

More roms hit. The ground leaped under them, bucking and heaving. A wave of force shuddering the whole house.

"We better lie down," Mary said.

"Yes. Lie down." Tim stretched himself out awkwardly. A few bits of plaster rained down around them.

"When will it stop?" Earl asked uneasily.

"Soon," Tim said.

"Then we'll be back?"

"Yes. We'll be back."

The next blast hit them almost at once. Tim felt the concrete rise under him. It grew, swelling higher and higher. He was going up. He shut his eyes, holding on tight. Higher and higher he went, carried up by the ballooning concrete. Around him beams and timbers cracked. Plaster poured down. He could hear glass breaking. And a long way off, the licking crackles of fire.

"Tim," Mary's voice came faintly.

"Yes."

"We're not going to—to make it."

"I don't know."

"We're not. I can tell."

"Maybe not." He grunted in pain as a board struck his back, settling over him. Boards and plaster, covering him, burying him. He could smell the sour smell, the night air and ash. It drifted and rolled into the cellar, through the broken window.

"Daddy," Judy's voice came faintly.

"What?"

"Aren't we going back?"

He opened his mouth to answer. A shattering roar cut his words off. He jerked, tossed by the blast. Everything was moving around him. A vast wind tugged at him, a hot wind, licking at him, gnawing at him. He held on tight. The wind pulled, dragging him with it. He cried out as it seared his hands and face.

"Mary—"

Then silence. Only blackness and silence.

Cars.

Cars were stopping nearby. Then voices. And the noise of footsteps. Tim stirred, pushing the boards

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from him. He struggled to his feet.

"Mary." He looked around. "We're back."

The basement was in ruins. The walls were broken and sagging. Great gaping holes showed a green line of grass beyond. A concrete walk. The small rose garden. The white side of the stucco house next door.

Lines of telephone poles. Roofs. Houses. The city. As it had always been. Every morning.

"We're back!" Wild joy leaped through him. *Back.* Safe. It was over. Tim pushed quickly through the debris of his ruined house. "Mary, are you all right?"

"Here." Mary sat up, plaster dust raining from her. She was white all over, her hair, her skin, her clothing. Her face was cut and scratched. Her dress was torn. "Are we really back?"

"Mr. McLean! You all right?"

A blue-clad policeman leaped down into the cellar. Behind him two white-clad figures jumped. A group of neighbors collected outside, peering anxiously to see.

"I'm okay," Tim said. He helped Judy and Virginia up. "I think we're all okay."

"What happened?" The policeman pushed boards aside, coming over. "A bomb? Some kind of a bomb?"

"The house is a shambles," one of the white-clad interns said. "You sure nobody's hurt?"

"We were down here. In the basement."

"You all right, Tim?" Mrs. Hendricks called, stepping down gingerly into the cellar.

"What happened?" Frank Foley shouted. He leaped down with a crash. "God, Tim! What the hell were you doing?"

The two white-clad interns poked suspiciously around the ruins. "You're lucky, mister. Damn lucky. There's nothing left upstairs."

Foley came over beside Tim. "Damn it, man! I *told* you to have that hot water heater looked at!"

"What?" Tim muttered.

"The hot water heater! I told you there was something wrong with the cut-off. It must've kept heating up, not turned off . . ." Foley winked nervously. "But I won't say anything, Tim. The insurance. You can count on me."

Tim opened his mouth. But the words didn't come. What could he say? —No, it wasn't a defective hot water

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heater that I forgot to have repaired. No, it wasn't a faulty connection in the stove. It wasn't any of those things. It wasn't a leaky gas line, it wasn't a plugged furnace, it wasn't a pressure cooker we forgot to turn off.

It's war. Total war. And not just war for me. For my family. For just my house.

It's for your house, too. Your house and my house and all the houses. Here and in the next block, in the next town, the next state and country and continent. The whole world, like this. Shambles and ruins. Fog and dank weeds growing in the rusting slag. War for all of us. For everybody crowding down into the basement, white-faced, frightened, somehow sensing something terrible.

And when it really came, when the five years were up, there'd be no escape. No going back, tipping back into the past, away from it. When it came for them all, it would have them for eternity; there would be no one climbing back out, as he had.

Mary was watching him. The policeman, the neighbors, the white-clad interns —all of them were watching him. Waiting for him to explain. To tell them what it was.

"Was it the hot water heater?" Mrs. Hendricks asked timidly. "That was it, wasn't it, Tim? Things like that do happen. You can't be sure . . ."

"Maybe it was home brew," a neighbor suggested, in a feeble attempt at humor. "Was that it?"

He couldn't tell them. They wouldn't understand, because they didn't want to understand. They didn't want to know. They needed reassurance. He could see it in their eyes. Pitiful, pathetic fear. They sensed something terrible—and they were afraid. They were searching his face, seeking his help. Words of comfort. Words to banish their fear.

"Yeah," Tim said heavily. "It was the hot water heater."

"I thought so!" Foley breathed. A sigh of relief swept through them all. Murmurs, shaky laughs. Nods, grins.

"I should have got it fixed," Tim went on. "I should have had it looked at a long time ago. Before it got in such bad shape." Tim looked around at the circle of anxious people, hanging on his words. "I should have had it looked at. Before it was too late."

THE END

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SCREAM AT SEA

BY ALGIS BUDRYS

The Hugo-winning author of The Man in the High Castle *(1962) and* Solar Lottery *(1955) is in top form with this ominous short about a typical American family interrupted at breakfast by enemy missiles launched seven years in* their *future but only six in* our *past!*

THE principal feature of Harry Meglow's life had been his ability to escape from seemingly complete disaster. True, his means of escape usually required flight to out-of-the-way corners, but Harry had been tailored by some Providence with the foresight to insure that he would feel at home in them.

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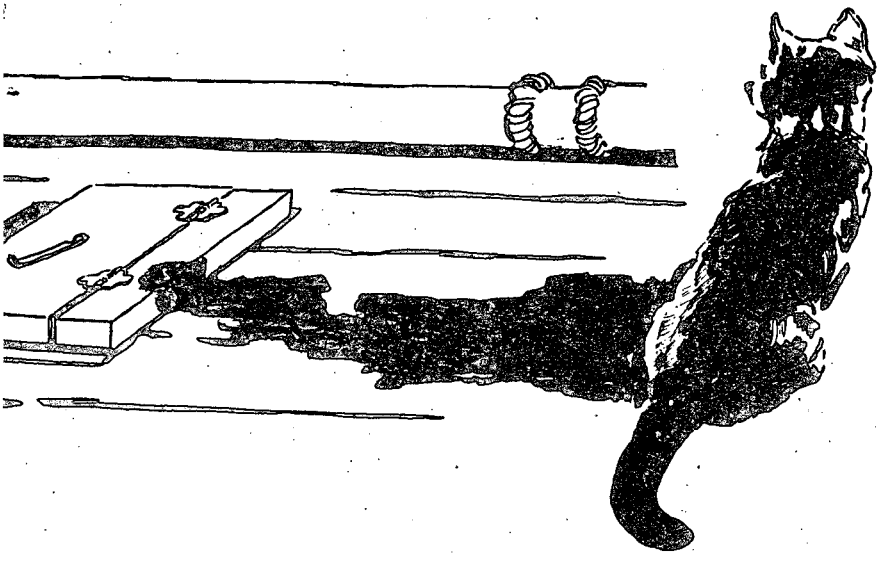
Illustrator: Ernie Barth



Consequently, he had found life in Venezuela not disagreeable, and not financially unrewarding. However, it became necessary, as a result of the latter circumstance, to find urgent employment as a cook's helper on a Panamanian tanker which had the desirable quality of departing for Lisbon almost immediately. He might have preferred a more elevated position, but he was completely ignorant of the sea. Moreover, hustling slops is still preferable to a South American jail and the good offices of the Venezuelan penal code.

The tanker was a thousand miles into the Atlantic when Meglow's special kind of good fortune reasserted itself. He was standing casually on deck, scratching the ears of the cook's cat, when some spark touched off the cargo of casing head.

High-test gasoline, pound for pound, is one of the more vicious explosives. Meglow found himself in the sea, and it was not until he tried to scramble aboard a raft that had whirled into the water near him that he became sufficiently conscious of what had happened to notice that the cat was

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still in his arms. He tossed it aboard and pulled himself up after it.

He and the cat were equally uncomprehending observers as the tanker tore itself completely open with one final blast, fountaining debris and fire in the singularly spectacular manner of tankers.

It was near twilight. Meglow found no survivors in the darkening water — or, rather, none cried out or swam toward him as the raft drifted away. This fact did not particularly bother him, for he was used to the undemanding company of himself. The thought that he was alone in the Atlantic was not particularly disquieting either, for by now the roots of his faith in the inevitable survival of Harry Meglow were sunk deep into the past, so thoroughly intertwined with every significant event in his life that it was a fundamentally optimistic Harry Meglow whose raft carried him farther and farther from the place where the tanker had wallowed down into the sea.

So, once he had accustomed himself to the raft's staccato motion on the choppy water, he was able to sleep without first giving any special thought to his present situation, the sequence of preceding events which had brought him to it, or the course of the future.

He woke up once during the night. The chop had subsided, but an overcast had left the ocean almost completely black, without stars or moonlight. He stared around him at the featureless unfamiliarity of the Atlantic at night, hearing no sound except the slap of water against the raft and the sibillance of his breath.

The water around him was pouring out the warmth it had stored up during the day. Nevertheless, his wet clothing was a cold and clinging shell around him. He tried to peel off his sweater, but the sodden wool bound around his neck and shoulders, smothering him, and he fought his face free with a flail of his arms and a frantic twist of his body. Breathing in spasms, he pulled the sweater back down over his stomach, but in a few minutes he managed a chuckle, and a little later he was asleep again.

He was awakened in the morning by the clawing and meowing of the cat. He rolled over, pushed the animal away from him, and stretched. The slats of the raft's superstructure were 1 x 2 lumber, spaced a half inch apart — an unyielding surface that stiffened muscle, bruised bone, and cut into skin. His sweater had shrunk, and clung tightly to his chest and arms. Both it and his dungarees were stiff and crusted with salt. His skin itched. He put his hand up to his eyebrows and hair. They were clogged and sticky. He grimaced in disgust.

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It was too early to tell, but he thought he might be getting a cold. His nasal passages were congested, and his throat was raw. Perhaps it was merely irritation from salt water inhaled during his frantic lunge for the raft. If it was a genuine cold — well, at least he was alive to have it.

He stood up and moved about in bursts of energy, quickening his circulation. It took him a while to become accustomed to the yielding surface the raft presented, but he was soon able to adjust his movements to it. He began to look around the raft.

The raft itself was more properly a float. It consisted of a slat superstructure around and on a series of metal drums — one of them, a makeshift replacement, actually was an empty oil drum — and stood about a foot out of the water. It was well in keeping with the ship from which it had come.

He found the food locker and watertank after a short while, sunken into the superstructure. There was a considerable supply of biscuits and some canned stuff with a Spanish label that turned out to be ham. He had no way of estimating how long it would last him, but there certainly seemed to be enough of it for some time to come. The watertank was full, and he had no great worries there, either, though again he did not know how many days' supply this actually was. To the problem of survival and rescue, he brought only his perversely optimistic fatalism.

He dug some ham out of the can with his fingers and began to eat it. When the cat rubbed up against his leg and wailed, he bent down absently and put some food on the deck for her, where she ate it hungrily. As he ate, he continued to survey his surroundings.

The raft was on smooth water, with a clear blue, white-flecked sky overhead. The wooden slats of the raft were warped in places, and some pieces of the deck — the top of a raft could be called a deck, he decided — had been replaced, the newer wood contrasting with the old, which was weathered and dotted with black pockmarks where the heads of nails had lost their paint and corroded. The entire raft needed repainting badly.

He finished the ham and threw the can overside, after which he bent down to the watertank for a drink.

The tank, as far as he could see, was the only piece of modern — or almost modern — equipment on the raft. It had a lid with a cup clipped to the underside, and a rubber seal to prevent as much evaporation as possible. He drank thirstily, then refilled the cup and set it down on the deck for the cat.

Idly, he swept his glance around

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the horizon, not especially hoping to see a ship, and was only mildly disappointed when he did not. There was something vaguely disquieting about the empty sea, not for its lack of any sign of rescue, but because of the sense that he was the only living man in at least thirteen hundred square miles — that is, if his memory was right about the horizon line being about twenty miles away, and if the formula for the area of a circle *was* $A = pi\ R^2$. The raft, hencoop of a structure that it was, embodied the only evidence that anything of Man had ever stirred this featureless water.

Meglow had never in his life been twenty miles away from another human being. The visualization of himself alone in the middle of a vast circle of emptiness was completely outside his experience.

He looked at the water around him again. It was no different from what it was in one direction than in another. It was all smooth water, apparently changing from dirty green to blue as it stretched farther away, but he knew that actually, even beyond the horizon, it was still dirty green.

Becoming conscious for the first time of the volume of sheer emptiness that an ocean could present, he lost some of the sense of romantic adventure which he had felt up to now — and still felt, but to a lesser degree. Still optimistic, if somewhat subdued, he spent the remainder of the day simply sitting on the raft with his hands around his knees, occasionally stroking the cat, which seemed to be having little difficulty in adjusting to a ten-by-ten environment. After eating some more ham, and drinking another cupful of water, he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the pitching and bucking of the raft, which shook with a completely unfamiliar and mechanical vibration. The cat, somewhere in the darkness beside him, was scratching at the slats.

He looked to his left, and saw something huge and gray slipping past him in the blackness. Running lights tracked a colored line across the sky, and the open door of a radio shack was a moving square of light. Paralyzed, he crouched on the bucking raft, riding the white froth of the ship's wake. When he finally managed to shout, the sound was thin and empty under the beat of the propeller in the water, and he knew it had not carried to the deck.

"Hey! Hey there! *For God's sake* —"

He shouted after the retreating ship for a long time, rasping his throat, and it was only after the raft had steadied down once more that he stopped, realizing with even greater force just how large an ocean was, how rare a thing had just occurred, and passed

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him by. Even on the deck of a ship, the closeness of bulkheads and cargo booms made the sea a thing that was somehow not as desolate as it actually was. Only a man alone on a miniscule platform of warped and dirty slatting could appreciate the closeness, the immediacy of the ocean. To a man on a ship, the sea was a stretch of broad uniformity which carried him on its back. To a man on a raft, the sea was a wilderness.

His heart was pounding. He could not sleep. When it began to rain shortly thereafter, he lay down flat on his stomach, his hands over the back of his head, the slats digging into his face. He felt the cat burrowing against him, but he continued to lie stiff and unmoving. It was up to her to take care of herself.

It rained into daylight. He was stiff and wet, and now he definitely had a cold. Moreover, either because the raft was bobbing on a chop even heavier than that of the first day, or as a reaction to his disappointment during the night, he was feeling sick. His eyes were burning, and his mouth was full of a thick spittle that tasted like corroded copper. The back passages of his nose felt swollen, he was nauseous, and his throat was ragged from the periodic rushes of bile that fought their way up into his esophagous. He was coughing a little.

He looked at the cat, which was huddled miserably against him, and this somehow made him feel better. He managed to chuckle at her cries.

The fact that he was still able to laugh made him feel better, and once the mood had been cracked, it broke and left him optimistic again, in spite of the steady downpour of rain and his coughing, which was complicating his nausea.

All right, so he's missed the ship. For all he knew, it was headed for Venezuela, where the police would be only too happy to have him. As a matter of fact, the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that something unpleasant would have awaited him aboard that vessel. No disaster in his life, no matter how serious it had been at first look, had ever really been as bad as it seemed. He had gotten into trouble in the States, and had found his way to South America. Once there, he had gotten quite a bit of money. Of course, he'd had to run for it, but the tanker had been readily available. And when the tanker exploded, he had survived. Come to think of it, it was probably because some harm waited for him in Lisbon that the ship had sunk.

He stared out over the white-capped ocean at the steel-gray horizon, and some of this new mood left him. He began to worry about the possibility of a full-

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fledged storm. Somehow, the sea seemed to be outside the abilities of his protecting destiny. On the raft, he was still Harry Meglow, still a living human being, with faith in himself and the future. But the Atlantic ran a foot below him, and in the Atlantic he would be a chip, an insignificant, purposeless something that would drift through the water for days before the pulped and fish-eaten remains settled down to the soundless bottom.

He tried to visualize the death of Harry Meglow. He tried to picture a world without him — and failed.

It rained until very late in the day, when the clouds broke and left the ocean in sunset. He was able to eat and drink a little. He fed the cat at the same time. She seemed to have come through the rain without any harm, and although her fur was still damp, it was drying rapidly. He became conscious of his own wetness. The temperature had dropped, and he began to shiver. His cough had gotten worse, and the glands in his throat had swollen, so that every time he swallowed, a painful pressure caught him around the neck. The breath whistling out of his nostrils was hot, and he knew he had a fever.

This time, he managed to get the sweater off. He sat with the wind chilling his bare skin, until finally he stood up, took off the dungarees as well, and began to exercise violently. He was warm and dry in a few minutes, but it would be hours before his clothes would dry. He was caught with the choice of putting them on again, or of remaining naked, in which case he would have to keep moving around.

Even as he considered the matter, he cooled off again, and began swinging his arms and running in place.

After five hours, the dungarees were dry enough to wear, and he put them on gratefully. The sweater was still wet, and he crouched on the slats with his arms folded over his chest. He tried hugging the cat for warmth, but she clawed at his arms and finally bit his hand. He dropped her with a curse and barely restrained himself from flinging her into the ocean.

The following day, the fever was worse, and his eyes were burning badly. Each time he swallowed, his eardrums popped, and his throat was almost closed. His bones ached, and there was a sharp pain in his chest. His vision was a little blurred.

When he got to his feet, the headache that pounded his skull made him stagger, and he closed his eyes at the pain. The cat was hungry again, and he opened a can of ham. By now, he had come to hate the salty taste and the

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mushy consistency, but he forced down a few mouthfuls and left the rest for the cat, which had a difficult time eating out of the flat, narrow can, but made the best of it. He opened the lid of the water-tank and drank a cupful of water, setting another cupful down for the cat, but when he lurched away, his foot struck the cup, and kicked it overside.

He stared at the place where it had gone over, his face dull, but then he shrugged. He could always use an empty ham can to bring water up out of the tank. The cat would go thirsty in the meantime, but that was the cat's problem. He collapsed on the deck, and lay staring at the sea.

On his side, as he was, his eyes were only a little more than a foot above the water. The illusion that he was actually in the sea had grown more powerful, and a corresponding fear of the Atlantic had grown with it.

It was not merely the realization of the ocean's incredible area that overwhelmed him. It was the knowledge that the ocean was as old as all the Earth itself, and as enduring. Where the wrecked tanker had been, there was not even a dimple in the water. A ship had passed him in the night, tossing the water under his raft. Where was the ship? Where was the wake? They had existed for a few moments, then disappeared, and left the sea unmarked.

He realized that the sea could take him, and that the ripples would not reach a hundred yards. There would be no marker, no sign to the world that it had lost him.

"No!" The word burst out of him, a croaked shout. He sat up, trembling, sharp chills running through his body, his chest heaving as he coughed. Somehow, he would live through this. The sea would not have him.

He fell back, his jaw clenched, his body rigid, his hands in tight fists.

But that night it rained again, a cold, sharply driven rain from the north that first cooled his dry and feverish skin, but which was soon an icy slick that shot his temperature up and had him delirious by morning. He thrashed about on the raft, retching past the agony in his throat. The raft was tossing badly, and the cat had dug its claws into one leg of his dungarees in an effort to hang on.

Enough consciousness returned to permit a lance of fear at the thought that he might roll off the raft. Shuddering with chills, his teeth chattering, he got to his hands and knees and took off his belt. He passed it around a slat and buckled it around his waist again. Then the bone-wrenching fever took hold of him again, and he lost consciousness.

He regained consciousness once

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more, and lay staring up into the bright sky, with his eyes running from the fever. The pain in his chest was like a spike transfixing him. He tried to move, could not, and remembered the belt. His cracked lips twisted into a grimace as he plucked at it feebly but could not find the buckle. He heard a scratching sound, and turned his head. The cat was clawing at the trap over the food locker and the watertank. His own mouth was dry, and he tried to open the belt once more, but when he finally located the buckle, he could not open it. His hands were weak, robbed of strength.

Dully, he turned his head in the opposite direction, and looked at the sea.

Once again, and for the last time, his perverse luck had made sure that things were not as bad as they might have been. The sea would not get him.

He coughed, and smiled at the pain. His breath was hoarse — harsh, labored. No, the sea had not killed him. He was going to die of pneumonia. He had not starved, or died of thirst, or been swept overboard. The sea had lost. He snorted again, a painful "huh" that gusted from his nostrils.

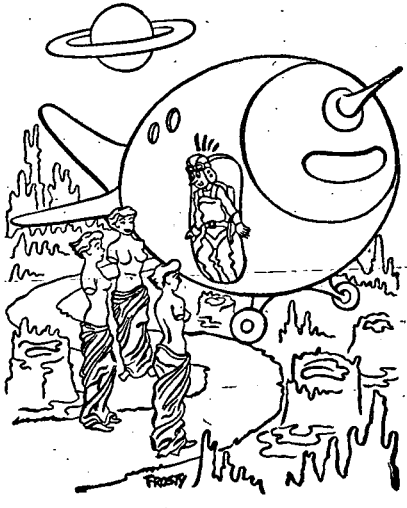
The cat was clawing at his leg. He managed to raise his hand and swing it through the air, and the cat jumped back, mewing.

"Sor — sorry, cat," he grunted. "Nobody's going to — be around — to open — any food for — you."

His head fell back, and he chuckled. He had even managed to leave a living thing behind to regret his passing. Somehow, the thought appealed to him.

And then he realized to what precise end his special Providence had brought him, and he found the energy, buried deep in his system somewhere, to cry out, the harsh yell flinging itself over the whitecaps. He braced his shoulders against the deck and tried to break free, but the effort drained him, and he collapsed. He lay motionless, except for the tears that poured from his eyes.

The raft was picked up three weeks later by a Brazilian tramp. The cat had not starved to death. It was not even hungry.



"Pardon me — is this Venus?"

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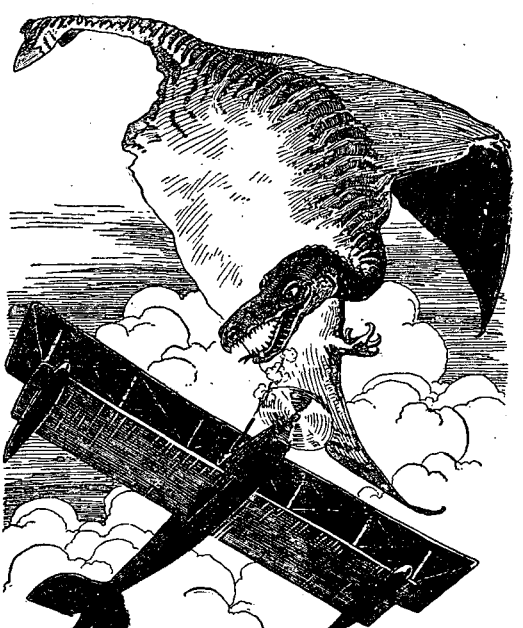
EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS: The Artists Behind Him

From his very first story, "Under the Moons of Mars"—which originally appeared way back in All-Story *for 1912—to the recent Ballantine edition of* Tarzan and the Valley of Gold *(1966)—Fritz Leiber's continuation of the Ape Man's adventures—the late Edgar Rice Burroughs has been very lucky indeed to have some of the field's greatest fantasy artists illustrating his work. And—since the late 1920's—both* Amazing *and* Fantastic *have also been fortunate in being able to run some of the best of those illustrations, particularly those by Frank R. Paul and J. Allen St. John—both immensely gifted, both liberally represented in the pages that follow.*



THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT Illustrated by Frank R. Paul (Amazing-1927)

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THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT Illustrated by Frank R. Paul (Amazing-1927)

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THE CITY OF THE MUMMIES Illustrated by J. Allen St. John (Amazing-1941)

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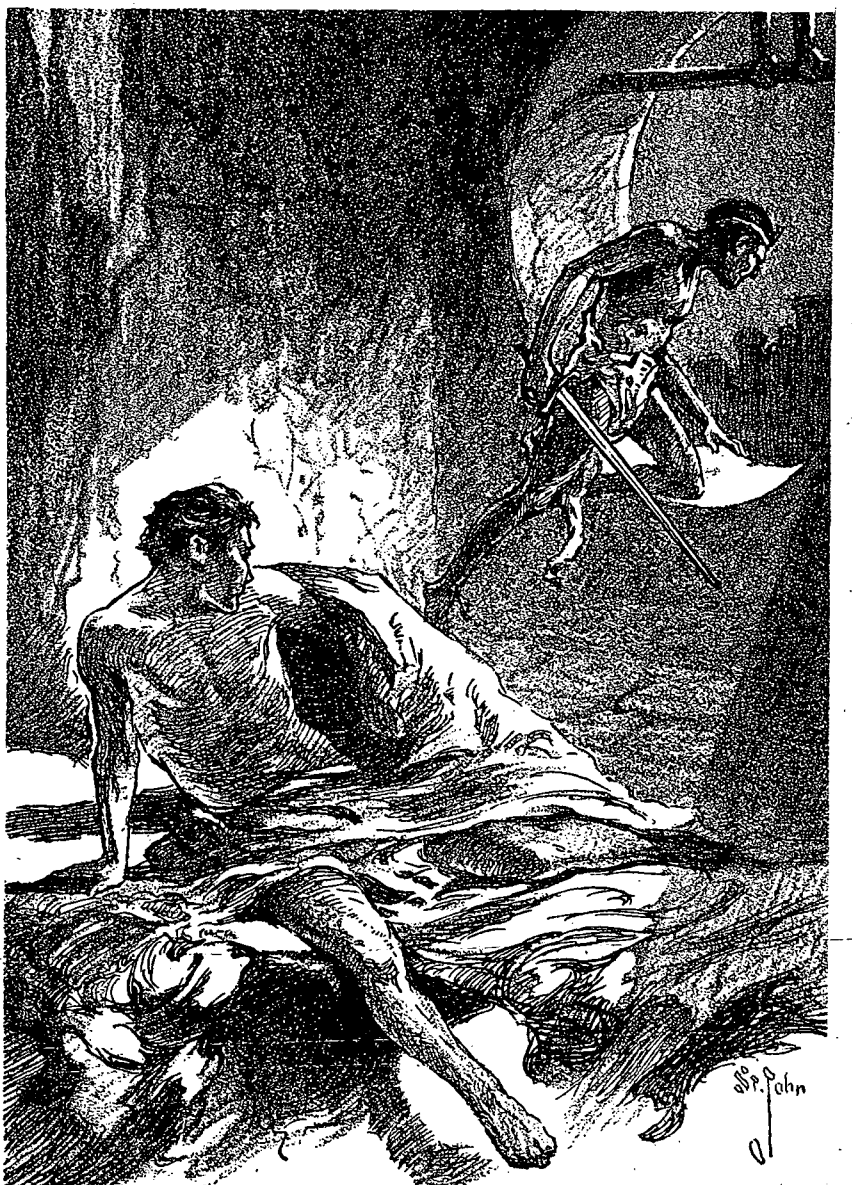

BLACK PIRATES OF BARSOOM Illustrated by J. Allen St. John (Amazing 1941)

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GODDESS OF FIRE Illustrated by J. Allen St. John (Fantastic 1941)

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(Continued from page 82)

My friend and I are up against an organization that can't be beaten, only hidden from. If you try to find me, you'll only spoil my chances.

You want a long happy life, don't you?—not just a few wretched months or hours before you're hunted down. Then your only chance is to do what I tell you.

Stay in your room all day. Then arrange your things just as you usually do before going to work in the morning. Set your alarm for the usual time. You must be very exact—a lot depends on it. Above all, burn this letter—on your honor do that. Then dissolve in a glass of water the powders you'll find on the table beside your bed, and drink it. In a little while you'll go to sleep and when you wake up, everything will be all right.

You may not believe me, but what reason would I have to lie? Honestly, Carr, your only chance to get clear of the danger you're in, and to help me, is to do exactly what I've told you. And forget me forever.

Carr walked over to the bed. On the little table, leaning against an empty tumbler, were two slim paper packets. He felt one between finger and thumb. It gritted.

He glanced again at the letter. His head had begun to ache stabbingly. Phrases that were anger-igniting sparks jumped at him: ". . . is sorry too . . . excusable . . ." What sort of a nincompoop did they think he was. Next she'd be saying, "So sorry we had to poison you." She was a nice girl, all right—of the sort who throws her arms around you so her boyfriend can stick a gun in your ribs.

He'd blundered into a nasty affair, and maybe he'd picked the wrong side.

And she did have a reason to lie. She might want to scare him off, keep him from discovering what she and her precious friend were up to, maybe gain time for some sort of getaway.

He hurried into his clothes, wincing at the jabs of pain. After pulling on his topcoat, he drained the last shot from the whisky bottle, tossed it back in the drawer, looked at the full bottles a moment, stuck one in his pocket, and went out, glaring savagely at the mirror-imprisoned Carr on the stairs.

He walked a block to the nearest hotel and waited for a cab. Two cruised by with their flags up, but the drivers ignored his arm-wavings and calls. He ground his teeth. Then one drew in to the curb, but just as he was getting ready to board it, two cold-eyed show-girls from the hotel swept by him and piled in. He swore out loud, turned on his heel and

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started walking deliberately.

It was a nice evening and he detested it. He felt a senseless rage at the people he passed. How nice it would be to smash all the neon signs, rip down the posters, break into the houses and toss out of the windows the crooning, moaning, brightly-blatting radios. Come the atom bomb!

But for all that, the fresh air was helping his head. as he neared Mayberry street he began to calm down, or at least focus his anger.

Halfway down the last block a car was parked with its motor softly chugging—a roadster with its top down. Just as he passed it, Carr saw a heavily-built man come out of the entry to the Gregg apartment. He strolled off in the opposite direction but Carr had already reocgnized him. It was Wilson.

Repressing the fear that surged through him, Carr made a snap decision and hurried after him.

But just then a voice behind him said, "If you value your life or your reason, keep away from that man." At the same time a hand gripped his elbow and spun him around.

This time the small dark man with glasses was wearing a black snap-brim hat and a tightly buttoned trenchcoat. And this time he didn't look terrified. Instead he was sardonically smiling. He rocked back and forth on his heels teetering precarlously.

"I knew you wouldn't stay in your room," he said. "I told Jane her letter would have just the opposite effect."

Carr doubled his fist, swung back his arm, hesitated. Damn it, he *did* wear glasses—pitifully thick-lensed ones.

"Go ahead," said the small dark man, "make a scene. Bring them down on us. I don't care."

Carr stared at the glasses bright with reflected street light. He caught a whiff of liquor.

"You wouldn't think, would you," the small dark man mused, "that as we stand here, conversing idly, we are both in deadly peril." He smiled. "No, I'm sure you wouldn't think that. And as for me, I'm not afraid of anything."

"Listen," Carr said, advancing with balled fist, "you slugged me last night. I didn't like that."

"So I did," said the small dark man, again rocking on his heels.

"Well, in that case—" Carr began, and then remembered Wilson. He whirled around. The portly man was nowhere in sight. He took a few steps then looked back. The small dark man was walking rapidly toward the purring roadster. Carr darted after him and sprang on the running board just as the other slipped behind the wheel.

"You wanted to distract me until he was gone," Carr accused.

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"You didn't want me to talk to him."

"That's right," the small dark man said carelessly. "Jump in."

Angrily Carr complied, as the small dark man pushed down on the clutch, shifted into first and stretched out in that position, put his face close to Carr's and began to talk. His words rode on a wind of whisky, but the voice was bitter and confessional.

"In the first place," he said, "I hate you—otherwise I'd be doing my best to get you out of this instead of leading you straight toward the center. I don't care what happens to you and tonight I don't give a damn what happens to me. But I still have a certain quixotic concern for Jane's feelings—her li'l romantic dreams. It's for her sake that I'm going to do what I'm going to do.

"And what are you going to do?" snapped Carr.

The roadster bucked, leaped forward with a roar.

Chapter XI

When you know the world's a big engine, it may go to your head. You'll think you can take crazy chances. But the big engine can chew you up just as quick as an ordinary engine chews up a smart-alecky factory hand...

Carr's gaze swung up as the grimy bed wall of a truck loomed higher, higher. "World Movers," the sign said. He closed his eyes. He felt a blood-checking swerve and a chalk-on-slate caress along their fender. When he opened his eyes again, it was to see a woman and child flash by not a foot from the running board. He lurched side-ways as they screamed around a corner, let go his hat to cling to the car, watched a coupe and streetcar converge ahead of them, closed his eyes again as they grazed through the gap.

"Stop, you idiot!" he commanded. "You're drunk!"

The small dark man leered at him. "That's right," he said triumphantly and turned back to the wheel just in time to miss taking the side off a parked sedan.

To either side small indistinguishable stores and dusty white street globes shot by, while blocks of brick and gleaming streetcar tracks vanished under the hood.

"Tell me what it's all about before you kill us," Carr yelled.

The small man snickered through his teeth. His hat blew off. Watching it go, Carr demanded, "Are you one of the men with black hats?"

The roadster went into a screaming skid. Carr cringed as a hot-dog vender's white stand ballooned in size. But the small dark man managed to straighten the roadster out in time, though Carr got a whiff of hot dogs.

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"Don't ask questions like that," the small dark man warned. I'm not brave." Then he goggled at Carr, drove with his left hand for a moment while he tapped his bare head with his right and said wisely, "Protective coloration."

Ahead cars skittered to the curb like disturbed ants. Over the motor's roar Carr became aware of a wailing that grew in volume. A wild white light mixed with red began to flood the street from behind them, its beam swinging back and forth like a giant pendulum. Then from the corner of his eye Carr noticed a seated man in a big black slicker heave into view several feet above him, creep abreast. Below the man was a vermillion hood. Behind him were dim ladders and coils, other slickered figures.

Ahead the street took a jog. It was impossible for both the roadster and the fire engine to get through.

Grinning, the small dark man nursed the throttle. The fire engine dropped back just enough for them to careen through the gap ahead of it, under a maze of trolley wires, while frozen pedestrians gaped.

Carr's fear left him. There was no use to it.

The street narrowed, its sides grew dark. Behind them the fire engine braked, took a turn.

"You're mixed up with Wilson and Hackman and Dris, aren't you?" Carr asserted loudly.

This time the roadster swerved to the left, and for a few moments roared along only inches from the curb, kicking up mud.

"Not that brave," the small dark man told him reprovingly as the roadster came back into the middle.

Carr caught a cold whiff of water and oil. Skyscrapers twinkled against the sky ahead, but just this side of them a gap in the buildings was widening and a black skeletal structure loomed.

A rapid clanging started. Towers flanking the black structure began to blink red. Carr grabbed for the wheel, stamped at the brake. "They're opening the bridge!" he yelled.

The small man kicked him in the ankle, clubbed his hands aside, and accelerated. Ahead were stopped autos and a black and white barrier. Swinging far to the left, they struck its flexible end. It rasped along the roadster's side, tore free with a great twang. They shot forward onto the dark span. To either side solidity dropped away. Far below, yellow windows of skyscrapers flowed in uneven patterns on the water.

They were three-quarters of the way across when, through their hurtling speed, Carr felt the feather touch of a titan. Under them the span had begun to rise. Ahead of them a thread of blackness ap-

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peared at the break in the jackknife of the span.

The small dark man clamped the throttle to the floor. There was a spine-compressing jar and jounce, the skyscrapers reeled, then another jar as the roadster came down—on its wheels. The tip of the second barrier broke off with a giant snap.

The open bridge had cleared the street ahead of traffic going their way. The small dark man breezed along it for four blocks like the winner of a race, then suddenly braked and skidded around the corner and across to the wrong side of the street. The two wheels on his side hit the curb and the roadster rocked to a stop.

Carr loosened his death-grip on dashboard and door handle, balled a fist and turned, this time without any compunction about glasses.

But the small dark man had vaulted out of the roadster and was lightly running up the steps of a building that Carr now realized was the public library. As he hit the sidewalk in pursuit, he saw the small dark man briefly silhouetted against the yellow rectangle of a swinging door. When Carr stiff-armed through it, the man was vanishing at the top of a flight of marble stairs.

Reaching the top, Carr felt a spurt of savage pleasure. He was gaining. Before him was a large, domed room, open shelves to one side, counters and booths to the other, unoccupied except for a couple of girls behind a window and a baldheaded man burdened with a stack of books and a briefcase.

The small dark man, with Carr almost at his heels, was racing toward a wall decorated with twinkling gold mosaic. He ducked down a narrow corridor and to his shock Carr realized they were both running on glass.

For a moment Carr thought that the small dark man had led him this long chase solely to get him to step through a skylight. Then he realized that he was on one of the many translucent cat-walks that served as aisles in the stacks of the library. He sprinted forward again, guided by the sonorous pit-pat of receding footsteps.

He found himself in a silent world within a world. A world several stories high and covering a good part of a block. An oddly insubstantial world of metal beams, narrow stairs, translucent runways, and innumerable books.

Like some animal that had reached its native element, the small dark man now held his lead, craftily doubling and redoubling his course. Carr caught glimpses of a cream-colored raincoat, he shook his fist at teeth and a grin spied through gaps in successive tiers of books, he clutched futilely at a small, expensive-looking shoe disappearing up a metal-

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treaded stair in a tantalizingly leisurely way.

He was painting and his side had begun to hurt, something in his topcoat was growing heavier. It began to seem to him that the chase would never end, that the two of them would go skipping and staggering on indefinitely, always the same distance apart.

The whole experience had acquired nightmarish overtones. It pleased Carr to remember that the Dewey Decimal System of book classification has an end. "If I don't catch him in the four hundreds, I'll get him in the fives. If not in the useful arts, then in the fine. He shan't double back to Mysticism and Witchcraft!"

He lurched around a corner and there, not ten feet away, back turned, standing beside an old brass-fitted drinking fountain that gurgled merrily, was his quarry.

Carr hiccuped a laugh between his gasps for air. This was no sinister metaphysical pursuit after all. It was just a chase in a Chaplin film. They would both refresh themselves at the fountain, commenting on the excellence of the water. Then the small dark man would nod politely and walk off. Carr would realize with whom he'd been drinking, and the whole chase would start over again.

But first, Carr decided, he'd slug the guy.

As he moved forward, however, it was inevitable that he should look at the thing at which the small dark man was looking.

Or rather, at the person.

For just inside the next aisle, gilt-buttoned brown suit almost exactly the same shade as the buckram bindings that made a background, lips formed in an ellipse of dismay that couldn't quite avoid being a smile, was Jane.

Carr drifted past the small dark man as if the latter were part of a dissolving dream. With every step forward the floor seemed to get solider under his feet.

Jane's lips held the same shape, she just tilted her head, as he put his arms around her and kissed her. He felt as if he had grasped the one real figure out of thousands in a room of mirrors.

She pushed away, looking up at him incredulously. His nerves reawoke with a jerk. "Where's he gone?" he asked, looking around him.

"Who?"

"The small dark madman with glasses."

"I don't know," she said. "He has a way of fading."

"I'll say he has!" He turned on her. "Though generally he tries to murder you first." His hands were beginning to tremble from delayed reaction to his ride.

"What?"

"Yes. I thought you said he

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was retiring. Even timid.

"He is. Terribly."

"Then you should have seen him tonight." And he told her about the ride. "I guess he got his courage out of a bottle," he finished, really shaking now.

"Oh, the coward," she breathed. "Pretending to sacrifice his own feelings, even to the point of bringing you to me—but really just doing it to hurt me, because he knew I wanted to keep you out of this. And then on top of it all, taking chances with your life, hoping that you both would die while he was being noble." Her lips curled.

"All right, all right!" Carr said, "But what's it all about?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Your friend and Hackman and Wilson and Dris and the four men with black hats and you being Tom Elvested's Jane Gregg, who wasn't there, and Jane Gregg of Mayberry Street."

She backed away from him, shaking her head.

He followed her. His voice was harsh. "Look, Jane," he said, "day before yesterday your friend ran away from me. Last night he knocked me out. Tonight he took crazy chances with my life. Why?"

The fear in her eyes brought his exasperation to the boil. "What have you and he done? Why are the others after you? What's wrong with your father and mother? What are you doing here? You've got to tell me!"

He had her backed against the shelves and was shouting in her face. But she would only goggle up at him and shake her head. His control snapped. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard.

But no matter how violently her head snapped back and forth, her lips stayed pressed tightly together. He suddenly loosed her and turned away, burying his head in his hands, breathing heavily.

When he looked up she was smoothing her suit. She bit her lip when her hand touched her shoulder. "Do I shake well?"

He winced. "Sorry," he said dully. "But I've just got to know."

"It would be the worst thing that could happen to you," she told him simply.

"I don't care."

"It would be like signing your death warrant."

"I tell you I don't care." He looked at her in a misery of exasperation. "Jane!"

"All right," she said quietly, "I'll tell you everything."

He looked at her incredulously. Then his eyes widened. For the first time he actually realized where he was.

"We've got to get out of here!" he said, jumping away from the shelves against which he'd been leaning.

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"Why?" She was as cool as ever.

"We're in the stacks," His voice automatically hushed itself. "No one can come here without a pass. We made enough racket to wake the dead. They're bound to come looking for us."

"Are they?" She smiled. "They haven't yet."

"And then—oh Good Lord—the traffic cops and who knows who else . . . they're bound to!" He looked down the long aisles apprehensively.

She smiled again. "But they haven't."

Carr turned wondering eyes on her. Something of the charming willfulness of the night before last seemed to have returned to her. He felt an answering spirit rising in himself.

And it did seem the height of silliness to worry about breaking library regulations just after you'd escaped a messy death a dozen times—and were about to hear the most important story in the world.

"All right," he said, "in that case let's have a drink." And he fished out of his pocket the unopened pint of whisky.

"Swell," she said, her eyes brightening. "The fountain's right there. I'll get paper cups."

Chapter XII

Of course if there's someone you really love, you've got to tell them the secret. For love means sharing everything, even the horrors . . .

Carr lowered his cup, half emptied.

"Listen," he said, "there's someone coming."

Jane seemed unconcerned. "Just a page."

"How do you know? Besides, he's coming this way."

He hustled Jane to the next aisle, where there was less light. The footsteps grew louder, ringing on the glass.

"Let's go farther back," Carr whispered. "He might see us here."

But Jane refused to budge. He peered over her shoulder. "Damn!" he breathed, "I forgot the bottle. He's bound to spot it."

Jane's shoulders twitched.

The he turned out to be a she, Carr saw by patches through the gaps between the shelves. A she with sleek black hair cut in bangs across the forehead, and a tight, dark red ress. She walked past their aisle, stopped at the second one beyond. She looked up.

"Here we are, boys and girls," they heard her say to herself in a loud bitter voice. "Oh, in six volumes, is it?" Is that all he expects at closing time?" She scribbled briefly on a slip of paper she was carrying. "Sorry, Baldy, but—out! You'll have to learn

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about the secrets of sex some other day."

And she returned the way she had come, humming "St. Louis Woman."

Carr recovered the bottle. "Quite a character," he said with a smile. "I'm not sure but what she didn't see us."

Jane gave him a look. Then she went to the next aisle and returned with a couple of stools. Carr pushed his topcoat back over some books. His face grew serious. For a moment they were silent. Then he said, "Well, I'm waiting."

Jane moved nervously. "Let's have another drink."

Carr refilled their cups. Jane just held hers. It was shadowy where they were. She reached up and tugged a cord. Extra light spilled around them. There was another pause. Jane looked at him.

"You must think of my childhood," she began, "as an empty, middle-class upbringing in a city apartment. You must think of me as miserable and lonely, with a few girl-friends whom I thought silly and at the same time more knowing than I. And then my parents—familiar creatures I was terribly tied to, but with whom I had no real contact. They seemed to go unhappily through a daily routine as sterile as death.

"The whole world was an ugly mystery to me. I didn't know what people were after, why they did the things they did, what secret rules they were obeying. I used to take long walks alone in the park, trying to figure it out." She paused. "It was in the park that I first met the small dark man with glasses.

"No," she corrected herself, frowning, "I didn't exactly meet him. I just noticed him watching me. Usually from a distance—from another path, or across the lagoon, or through a crowd of people. He'd watch me and follow me for a way and then drift out of sight and maybe turn up again farther on.

"I pretended not to notice him. I knew that strange men who followed girls were not to be trusted. Though I don't think I was ever frightened of him that way. He looked so small and respectful. Actually I suppose I was beginning to feel romantic about him." She took a swallow of her drink.

Carr had finished his. "Well?"

"Oh, he kept coming closer and then one day he spoke to me. 'Would you mind if I walked with you for a while?' he asked. I gulped and managed to say, 'No,' That's all. He just walked beside me. It was days before he even touched my arm. But that didn't matter. It was what he said that was important. He talked hesitatingly, but he knew the thoughts inside me I'd never told anyone—how puzzling life was, how alone

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you felt, how other people sometimes seemed just like animals, how they could hurt you with their eyes. And he knew the little pictures in my mind too—how the piano keys looked like champing teeth, how written words were just meaningless twists of ribbon, how snores sounded like faraway railway trains and railway trains like snores.

"After we'd walked for a while that first day, I saw two of my girlfriends ahead. He said, "I'll leave you now,' and went off. I was glad, for I wouldn't have known how to introduce him.

"That first walk set a pattern, almost as if we'd learned a list of magic rules. We must always meet as if by accident and part without warning. We must never go any special place. We must never tell our names. We must never talk of tomorrow or plan anything, just yield to a fatalistic enchantment. Of course I never mentioned my friend to a soul. Away from the park I'd say, 'You dreamed him, Jane,' almost believing it. But the next afternoon I'd go back and he'd appear and I'd walk with him and have the feeling of a friend seeing into my mind. It went on that way for quite a while." She emptied her cup.

"And then things changed?" Carr asked as he poured her more.

"In a way."

"Did he start to make love to you?" It would seem he. . ."

"No. Perhaps that was what was wrong. Perhaps if he'd made love to me, everything would have been all right. But he never did any more than take my arm. He was like a man who walks with a gun at his back. I sensed a terrible, mute tension inside him, born of timidity or twisted pride, a seething flood of frustrated energy. Eventually it began to seep over into me. For no good reason my heart would start to pound, I could hardly breathe, and little spasms would race up and down me. And all the while he'd be talking calmly. It was awful. I think I would have done something to break that tension between us, except for the magic rules and the feeling that everything would be spoiled if we once disobeyed them. So I did nothing. And then things began to get much worse."

"How do you mean?" Carr asked.

Jane looked up at him. Now that she was lost in her story, she looked younger than ever.

"We were stuck, that's what it amounted to, and we began to rot. All that knowledge he had of my queer thoughts began to terrify me. Because, you see, I'd always believed that they were just quirks of my mind, and that by sharing them I'd get rid of them. I kept waiting for him to tell me how silly they were. But he never

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did. Instead, I began to see from the way he talked that my queer thoughts weren't illusions at all, but the truth. Nothing did mean anything. Snores actually were a kind of engine-puffing, and printed words had no more real meaning than wind-tracings in sand. Other people weren't alive, really alive, like you were. You were all alone."

A bell clanged. They both started.

Jane relaxed. "Closing time," she explained.

Carr shrugged. That they were in the stacks of the library had become inconsequential to him. "Go on," he said.

"Now the walks did begin to effect the rest of my life. All day long I'd be plunged in gloom. My father and mother seemed a million miles away, my classes at the music academy the stupidest things in the world. And yet I didn't show anything outwardly. No one noticed any change, except Gigolo my cat, who sometimes acted afraid and spat at me, yet sometimes came purring to me in a most affectionate way—and sometimes watched at the windows and doors for hours, as if he were on guard. I was lost and not one soul tried to save me, not even my man in the park."

She took a drink and leaned back. "And then one autumn day when the clouds were low and the fallen leaves crackled under our feet, and we'd walked farther together than ever before, in fact a little way out of the park, I happened to look across the street and I noticed a spruce young man looking at us. I called my friend's attention to him. He peered around through his thick glasses.

"The next instant he had grabbed me tight above the elbow and was marching me ahead. He didn't speak until we got around the corner. Then he said, in a voice I'd never heard him use before, 'They have seen us. Get home.'

"I started to ask questions, but he only said, 'Don't talk. Don't look back.' I was frightened and obeyed him.

"In the hours afterwards my fear grew. I pictured 'them' in a hundred horrible ways. I went to sleep praying never to see the small dark man again and just be allowed to live my old stupid life.

"Some time after midnight I awoke with my heart jumping, and there was Gigolo standing on the bedclothes spitting at the window. I made myself get up and tiptoe-to-it. Two-dark-things rose above the outside sill. They were the top of a ladder resting against it. I looked down. Light from the alley showed me the smiling face of the young man I'd seen across the street that afternoon. You know him, Carr, the one they call Dris—Driscoll Ames. He had two hands then. He reached them

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up to open the bedroom window.

"I ran to my father's and mother's room. I called to them to wak up. I shook them. And then came the most terrible shock of my life. They wouldn't wake, no matter what I did. Except that they breathed, they might have been dead. I remember pounding my father's chest and digging my nails into his arms.

"I think that even without Gigolo's warning snarl and the sound of footsteps coming swiftly through the bathroom, I would have rushed out of the apartment, rather than stay a moment longer with those two living corpses who had brought me into the world."

Her voice was getting high. Carr looked uneasily down the empty, booklined aisles.

"I darted down the front stairs and there, peering at our mailbox, I saw an older man. You know him too, Carr. Wilson. He looked at me through the glass panel of the inner door and then he looked at my nightdress, and then he smiled like the young man on the ladder.

"With steps pounding down the stairs there was only one way for me to go. I ran down through the basement, past the stone wash tubs and the padlocked storage rooms, and out into the dirty cement area-way. And there, standing in the alley, in the light of one high naked bulb, I saw my handsome fairy godmother."

Carr blinked. She smiled thinly and said, "Oh yes, my fairy godmother, just like Cinderella's, come to rescue me. A tall beautiful golden haired woman in a golden evening dress. There was a black band around her wrist, like the strap of a handbag.

"Then I saw that the black band was a leash, and at the other end of the leash was a huge hound that stood high as her waist and was dirty gray like the fence behind them. It was snuffing at the rubbish.

"Then Hackman—for of course it was she—saw me crouching under the back porches and her lips formed in a smile, but it was different from the men's smiles, because it was at the thought that the hound would get me before the men.

"Just at that moment Gigolo shot past my legs with a squalling cry and hurtled off down the alley. With a great bound the hound was after him, dragging my fairy godmother after him stumbling and slipping, ignoring her curses and frantic commands, dirtying her lovely golden gown. And I was racing off in the opposite direction, the hound's baying filling my ears.

"I ran for blocks, turning corners, cutting across lawns, before I stopped—and then only because I couldn't run any farther. But it was enough. I seemed to have got-

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ten away to safety.

"But what was I to do? I was cold. The windows peered. The street lights whispered. The shadows pawed. There was always someone crossing a corner two blocks away. I thought of a girlfriend who was at least a little closer to me than the others, a girl named Midge who was studying at the music academy.

"She lived in a duplex just a few blocks away. Keeping out of the light as much as I could, I hurried over to it. Her bedroom window was open a little. I threw some pebbles at it, but nothing happened. I didn't like to ring. Finally I managed to step from the porch to her window and crawl inside. She was asleep, breathing easily. 'Bu this time I was telling myself that my father and mother had been drugged as part of a plan to kidnap me. But not for long.

"For you see, I was no more able to rouse Midge than my parents.

"I dressed in some of her clothes and climbed out the window and walked the streets until morning. Then I tried to go home, but I went cautiously, spying out the way, and that was lucky, for in a parked automobile across from our apartment sat Wilson. I went to the academy and saw Hackman standing at the head of the steps. I went to the park and there, where my small dark man used to wait for me, was Dris. "And then I knew for sure."

"Knew what?" Carr asked after a pause.

She looked at him. "You know," she said. "You told me yourself in front of the Art Institute."

"What?" Carr repeated uneasily.

Her face seemed incredibly tiny as she sat hunched on her stool, her brown suit shading into the background. The stacks were silent, the mutter of the city was inaudible, a scampering mouse at the other end of the building might have been heard. In all directions the narrowing aisles stretched off. All around them was the pressure of the hundreds of thousands of books. But always the tunneling gaps, the peepholes, the gaps between the books.

And then, one by one, moving in on them, the lights in the stacks began to wink out.

"Just that everything's dead," Jane whispered. "Just that people are corpses. You don't have to have the psychologists tell you that consciousness is unnecessary. You don't have to listen to the scientists who say that everything's atoms. All you have to do is read the schoolbooks, the schoolbooks written by dead minds the same way a newspaper is printed by dead metal. They all tell you the same thing—that the

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universe is just a big machine."

Chapter XIII

If you can't get back to your place in the machine, your chances are slim, brother. By being smart and never making a mistake, you may be able to stay alive. But it's lonely work, even if you've got a buddy. . . .

"No," Carr breathed. All the lights had gone out except the one above their heads, which seemed to glow like some limpid eye.

Jane smiled at him crookedly. "But you told me that yourself," she repeated, "not knowing half of what you know now. Just a big machine, that's all it is. Except every now and then a mind awakens, or is awakened by another mind. One in a million. If the wakened mind keeps to its place in the machine, it may be safe. But if it leaves its place, God help it!"

"Why?" Carr asked unwillingly.

"Because the pattern won't change for it—and the minds that have wakened first will hunt it down and destroy it. Or else they'll corrupt it."

"Why should that be?" Carr demanded. "Why wouldn't the wakened minds want to waken other minds, more and more of them, until the whole machine's awake?"

Jane's lips shaped themselves in a sneer. "Because that isn't the way wakened minds operate—and besides, they can't waken other minds, except in a few lucky cases by a tremendous and uncontrollable effort of will. But they don't want to waken other minds, except to torture them. They're selfish and frightened and mad with desire. They glory in being able to do whatever they want, no matter how cruel or obscene, in a dead world that can't stop them." (There sprang into Carr's mind the memory of the four men with black hats and the dead-alive mannequin.) "They're deathly afraid of rivals stealing their privileged position—and every wakened mind is a rival, to be corrupted and joined with them in their selfishness, or else destroyed. All they can see is the prey and the loot."

"No," Carr breathed, "I can't believe it."

"Can't believe it!" Again Jane smiled crookedly. "If you'd seen and known what I've seen and known this past year—"

"Year?" Carr said incredulously.

"Yes, it's that long since I ran away from my fairy godmother. Give me another drink. No, more. And take some yourself. Yes, a whole year."

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She drank greedily and looked at him for a while. "Do you know Chicago, Carr? I do. I know it like a big museum, with all sorts of interesting dead things in the showcases and the animated exhibits. At times it's almost restful. And at times it's almost beautiful, like an elaborate automaton set before a European king. Only every once in a great while you see someone else in the museum, perhaps at the end of a long corridor. You might call them the museum guards, for they don't want you to be there. And you can't go home from the museum, you have to live there forever. Is there anything left in the bottle?"

"A little," he said. "No, enough for two."

"I've lived a year in the museum," she continued, receiving the paper cup from him. "I've slept in parks, in empty furnished flats, in department store display rooms, in that boarded-up old Beddoes mansion, on leather couches in clubs and waiting rooms that are closed at night, on stolen campbeds in offices and warehouses—but not in empty hotel rooms, for you can't tell when they'll be occupied. I've stolen food from delicatessens, snatched it from the plates of people who couldn't see me or anything, gone straight into the kitchens of the most expensive restaurants—and hooked candy bars from drugstore stands. Shall I tell you about the blind crowds I've threaded through, the unseeing trucks I've dodged, the time I got blood-poisoning and cured it myself behind a prescription counter, the theaters I've haunted, the churches I've crept into, the els I've ridden back and forth for hours, the books I've read down here—and all of it alone."

"Still you had one person," Carr said slowly. "The small dark man with glasses."

"That's right," she said bitterly, "we did meet again."

"I suppose you lived together?" Carr asked simply.

She looked at him. "No, we didn't. We'd meet here and there, and he taught me how to play chess—we played for days and days—but I never lived with him."

Carr hesitated. "But surely he must have tried to make love to you," he said. "And when you realized there was no one in the whole world but the two of you . . ."

"You're right," she said uncomfortably. "He did try to make love to me."

"And you didn't reciprocate?"

"No."

"Don't be angry with me, Jane, but that seems strange. After all, you had only each other."

She laughed unhappily. "Oh, I would have reciprocated, except for something I found out about

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him. I don't like to talk about it, but I suppose I'd better. A few weeks after I ran away, I met him in another park. I came on him unawares and found him holding a little girl. She was standing there, flushed from running. looking very alive, her bright eyes on her playmates, about to rush off and join them. He was sitting on the bench behind her and he had his arm lightly around her and he was stroking her body very tenderly, but with a look in his eyes as if she were so much wood. Sacred wood, perhaps but wood." Jane sucked in her breath. "After that I couldn't bear to have him touch me. In spite of all his gentleness and understanding, there was a part of him that wanted to take advantage of the big machine for his cold private satisfactions—take advantage of poor dead mechanisms because he was aware and they weren't. You've seen the same thing, Carr, in the eyes of Wilson and Hackman and Dris—that desire to degrade, to play like gods (devils, rather) with the poor earthly puppets? Well, something's corrupting my friend in the same way. He's never told me. But I know."

Carr said, "I heard Wilson tell Hackman that your friend had once been hers. It made her very angry."

"I might have guessed," Jane said softly. "That's where the nasty streak in him comes from. And that's why they're hunting him—because they're afraid he'll betray them to . . . still others."

"To the four men with black hats?" Carr asked.

She looked at him with a new fear in her eyes. "I never heard of them," she said.

"Go on," Carr urged.

"He must have run away from Hackman and Wilson and Dris," she said, her eyes seeing things distant. "And then, because he was lonely, he was drawn to me, one girl picked from a million. He didn't want to wake me, because he lacked the courage to love me or corrupt me, either. So he half wakened me, wanting to keep me in a dream world forever."

She looked at Carr unsmilingly. "I never wanted to do anything like that to you," she said. "I came to you in desperation, when I was followed by Hackman. I ran into the office because I knew the place from Midge's boyfriend working there. The applicant's chair at your desk was empty. I thought you were just another puppet, but I hoped to fool Hackman by pretending to be part of the patten around you.

"For you see, Carr, they'd never seen me clearly. Hackman couldn't be sure I was the girl in the alley, though I must have looked enough like her to make Hackman suspicious. And they

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don't want to disturb the world too much and they're afraid of attracting the attention of . . . still others. Though in the end she took the risk of slapping my face—and of course I had to walk on without noticing, like a machine.

"But as soon as I realized you were awake, Carr, I did my best to keep you out of it. I knew the only safe thing for you would be to stay in your pattern."

"How can a wakened person stay in his pattern?" Carr demanded.

"It can be done," Jane assured him. "Haven't you managed to stay in your pattern most of the time, even since you've known or at least suspected? Haven't you been able to do and say the right things at your office, even when you were terribly afraid that you couldn't?"

He had to admit that was so.

"Why, even I could go back to my pattern tomorrow," Jane continued, "go back to my parents and Mayberry Street and the academy, except—another drink, please—" (There were only drops, but they shared them) "—except that *they* know about me now, they know my pattern and so they'd be able to get me if I should go back.

"So I did my best to keep you out of it," she hurried on. "The first time I warned you and went away from you. Then that night, when you came to me with all your suspicions of the truth, I laughed at them and I did everything I could to convince you they were unreal . . . and I left you again."

"But even the first time," Carr said gently, "you left me that note, telling me where I could meet you."

She looked away from him. "I wasn't strong enough to make a complete break. I pretended to myself you'd find that first note too silly to bother about. There's an unscrupulous part of my mind that does things I really don't want to . . . or perhaps that I really want to. The second time it made me drop that envelope with my address in front of the Beddoes house, where you'd remember it and find it the next evening."

"Because I was watching you," she admitted, dropping her gaze.

"Watching me?"

"Yes through a crack in one of the boarded-up windows."

"But why didn't you come out when you saw me?" Carr asked.

"I didn't want you to find me again. But I was worried about you and when I saw you pick up that envelope I knew what you were going to do. So I followed you."

"To Mayberry?"

She nodded. "When you went in I waited outside, hiding in the shadows across the street, until Hackman and Wilson came.

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Then I ran around through the alley—"

"Remembering what had been there the last time?" Carr interrupted.

She grinned nervously. "—and went up the back stairs. I found you and my friend in the bedroom. He'd just hit you. Hackman and Wilson were killing Gigolo in the front hall—"

"Your cat?"

She shut her eyes. "Yes, Gigolo's dead."

She went on after a moment, "While they were doing that I told my friend who you were and we carried you down the back way to his car and . . ."

"How did your friend happen to be there in the first place?" he asked.

"He has queer habits," she said uncomfortably, "a sort of morbid sentimentality about objects connected with me. He often goes to my room though I'm never there."

"All right, so you carried me down to his roadster," Carr said.

"And then we found your address in your pocket book and drove you back to your room and put you to bed. I wanted to stay though I knew it wouldn't be safe for you, but my friend said you'd be all right, so—"

"—you departed," he finished for her, "after writing me that letter and leaving me those powders. What were they, by the way? Medicine of some sort?"

"Just two sleeping tablets crushed up," she told him. "I hoped they'd get you started right the day after, help you get back into the pattern. Sleeping tablets are very useful there."

He shook his head. "I can't get back into the pattern, Jane."

She leaned toward him. "But you can, Carr. They don't know anything about you. They may suspect, but they can't be sure. If you stay in the pattern—your old job, your old girl—they'll forget their suspicions."

"I don't think I could manage it. I'd crack up," he said, adding in lower tones, "Besides, I wouldn't leave you."

"But I'm lost forever," she protested. "You aren't. You still have a safe path through life. You don't have to stay in the dark museum."

He looked around at the actual darkness of the stacks and for the first time it all really hit him. Chicago a dead city, empty as the aisles around them, but here and there at great invervals the faintest of evil rustlings. Hundreds of blocks of death, or non-life, and here two motes of awareness.

"No," he said slowly, "I won't go back."

"But you can't help me," she told him. "You'll only make it harder." She looked down. "It isn't because I think you can

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help me that the unscrupulous part of my mind keeps drawing you back."

"We could go far away," Carr said.

"We'd still be out of the pattern. More conspicuously than ever. And there would be other gangs."

"But at the worst these awakened ones are only people, Jane."

"You think so?" she said scornfully. "You don't think their minds are strong with the evil wisdom of the wakened, passed down from wakened mind to mind for centuries?"

"But there must be some decent wakened people."

She shook her head. "I've never heard of any, only the cruel little gangs."

"And the little man?"

"After tonight? He's my friend no longer. Besides, fear will make him do anything. He can't be trusted."

"But I can help you," Carr insisted stubbornly. "I had a sign in a dream last night."

"What was that?"

"It's fuzzy now, but you and I were prisoners somewhere, all tied up, and I cut your bonds and we escaped."

"Was that the finish?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure. Maybe something got us in the end."

"You see?"

"But that was only a dream," he protested with a smile."

"And a sign, you said."

"Jane, don't you understand? I have to help you." He started to put his arms around her, but she quickly got up and turned away.

"What's the matter?" he asked, following her.

She held her shoulders stiffly, but she had trouble speaking. "Go away, Carr. Go away right now."

"I can't, Jane."

"Now, Carr. Please."

"No, Jane, I won't."

She stood there a moment longer. Then her shoulders sagged. Carr felt the tension go out of him too. He rubbed his eyes.

"Lord," he exclaimed, "I wish I had another drink."

She turned around and her face was radiant. Carr looked at her in amazement. She seemed to have dropped her cloak of fear and thrown around her shoulders a garment that glittered.

"Come on," she said.

He followed her as if she were some fairy-tale princess—and she did seem to have grown taller—as she went three aisles over, pulled on a light, took down from an upper shelf three copies of *Marius the Epicurean,* stuck her hand into the gap and brought out a fifth of scotch.

His eyes widened. "You certainly do yourself proud."

She laughed. "Would you really

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like to see?" And recklessly tumbling down other clutches of books, she showed him a packrat accumulation of handkerchiefs, peanuts and candy, jewelry, cosmetics, even a long golden wig (she held that to her cheek a moment, asking him if he liked blondes), shoes, stockings, dresses, scarves, and all sorts of little boxes and bottles, cups, plates, and glasses.

Taking two of the latter, crystal-bright and long stemmed, she said, "And now will you have a drink with me, prince, in my castle?"

Chapter XIV

There's one nice thing about the world being an engine. It gives you something exciting to watch. You can even have some fun with it, kid it a little. But don't hurt the poor puppets . . .

Like two drunken pirate stowaways from the hold of a Spanish galleon, tipsily swaying and constantly shushing each other, Carr and Jane went up a narrow stair, groped through the foreign language section, and crossed the library's unlighted rotunda. Carr's heart went out to the shadows festooning the vast place. He felt he could fly up to them if he willed, wrap them around him fold on fold. They looked as warm and friendly as the scotch felt inside him.

Then, weaving behind Jane down a broad white stairway, it occurred to him that they might be prince and princess stealing from a marble castle, bound on some dangerous escapade. Here within, all gloom and silent grandeur, save where an unseen guard rattled his pike—say over there, by the elevator, or behind that high glass case. Outside, the city, restless and turbulent, holding wild carnival, but full of rebellious mutterings, "... . in a nasty mood," the old Archduke had said, tugging his silvered sideburns. " 'Twere well your majesties not show yourselves. I have given order to double the palace guard. If only we could set hand on those two young firebrands who raise this malcontent!" Here he knotted his veiny white fist. "The Flame, the girl is called. 'Tis said she bears a likeness to your majesty. Our spies are everywhere, we have set traps at every likely gathering place, but still the two elude us!"

Then, just as the Archduke was launching into his baritone solo, "The awful grandeur of the state strikes terror in men's souls," Carr realized that Jane had got throught the door to the street. He followed her outside and halted, entranced. For there, beyond the wide sidewalk, was a most fitting continuation of his

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fantasy—a long low limousine with silvery fittings and softly glowing interior.

Then he saw that it was no pumpkin coach, at least not for himself and Jane, for approaching it at a stately waddle came two well-fed elderly couples, the men in top hats. Under the street lights, the features of all four were screwed up into an expression of germicidal haughtiness. While they were still some yards away, a Negro chauffeur opened the door and touched his visored cap.

Jane suddenly scampered straight at the sedate waddlers. Carr watched in growing amazement and delight as she veered off at the last moment, but in passing reached out and knocked off the nearest top hat. And the old fool wearing it marched on without even turning his head.

It hit Carr with all the instant impact of that crucial drink which opens the door to wonderland. There at his feet and Jane's lay the city—a playground, a nursery, a zoo, a congergation of lock-stepping robots, of mindless machines. You could do anything! No one could stop you!

With a whoop he raised his arms and ran lurchingly across the sidewalk at a wide angle that caught him up with Jane so that they raced around the corner hand in hand.

And now they were prince and princess no longer, but wizard's children with stolen cloaks of invisibility. Under their winged feet the pavement fled. Horns and street car bells struck up a dulcet, nerve-quickening music, as if for acrobats preparing for their star turn.

Across their path a theater lobby spilled a gabbling, cigarette-puffing, taxi-hailing horde. Oh, the beautiful joy of rushing through through them, of jostling powdered shoulders, of hopelessly tangling half-donned overcoats, of plucking at ties and shawls under the glare of yellow lights, of bobbing up and gibbering like apes into stuffy, unseeing faces.

Next, in an exhibition of hair-raising daring and split-second dexterity, to spring from the sidewalk and dart between speeding cab and green sedan, to jeer at the blind drivers, almost to slip and sprawl on gleaming tracks in front of a vast rhinoceros of a streetcar, to regain balance deftly and glide between moving chromium bumpers just beyond, finally to gain the opposite sidewalk, your ears ringing with a great shout of applause—and to realize you had uttered that shout yourself!

Oh, to hiss into the ear of a fat woman with smug suburban face, "The supreme court has just declared soap-operas unconstitutional," to scream at a solemn man with eleven-dollar shirt,

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"The Communists have set up a guillotine in Grant Park!" to say to a mincing, dopey-eyed sweater-girl, "I'm a talent scout. "Follow me," to a well-dressed person with an aura of superiority, "Gallop Poll. Do you approve of Charlemagne's policies toward the Saxons?" to a slinking clerk, "Burlesque is back," to a dull, beefy jerk in overalls, "Free beer behind the booths, ask for Clancy," to a fish-faced bookie, "Here, hold my pocketbook," to a youth, "Follow that man," to a slim intellectual with briefcase, at court-stenographer speed, "Watch the sky. A wall of atomic catastrophe, ignited by injudicious Swedish experiments, is advancing across Labrador, great circle route, at the rate of seventeen hundred and ninety-seven miles an hour."

And finally, panting, sides needled by delicious breathlessness, to sink to a curb and sit with back resting against metal trash box and laugh gaspingly in each other's faces, doubling up after each new glimpse of the blind, grotesque faces on the conveyor-belt called a sidewalk.

Just then a police siren sounded and a large gray truck grumbled to a stop in front of them. Without hesitation, Carr scooped up Jane and sat her on the projecting backboard, then scrambled up beside her.

The light changed and the truck started. The siren's wail rose in volume and pitch as a paddy wagon turned into their street a block behind them. It swung far to the left around a whole string of traffic and careened into a pocket just behind them. They looked into the eyes of the red-jowled coppers. Jane thumbed her nose at them.

The paddy wagon braked to a stop and several policemen poured out of it and into a dingy hotel.

"Won't find us there," Carr smirked. "We're gentlefolk." Jane squeezed his hand.

The truck passed under the dark steel canopy of the elevated. Its motor growled as it labored up the approach to the bridge.

Carr pointed at the splintered end of a barrier. "Your friend did that on the way down," he informed her amiably. "I wish he were along with us." He looked at Jane. "No, I don't," he added. "Neither do I," she told him.

His face was close to hers and he started to put his arms around her, but a sudden rush of animal spirits caused him instead to plant his palms on the backboard and lift himself up and kick his feet in the air.

He fell backwards into the truck as Jane yanked at him. "You're still quite breakable, you know," she told him and kissed him and sat up quickly.

As he struggled up beside her,

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the truck hustled down the worn brick incline at the opposite end of the bridge and grated to a stop at a red light. A blue awning stretched to the edge of the sidewalk. Above the awning, backed by ancient windows painted black, a bold blue neon script proclaimed "Goldie's Casablanca."

"That's for us," Carr said. He hopped down and lifted Jane off the truck as it started up again.

Inside the solid glass door beneath the awning, a tall, tuxedo-splitting individual with the vacant smile of a one-time sparring partner, was wagging a remonstrating hand at a fist-swinging fat man he held safely pinned against the wall with the other. Carr and Jane swept past them. Carr whipped out several dollar bills importantly, then remembered that the world is a machine and dropped them on the floor. They descended a short flight of stairs and found themselves in the most crowded nightclub in the world.

The bar, which ran along the wall to their left, was jammed three deep. Behind it towered two horse-faced men in white coats. One was violently shaking a silver cylinder above his head, but its rattle was lost in the general din.

Packed tables extended from the foot of the stairs to a small, slightly raised dance floor, upon which, like some thick vegetable stew being stirred by the laziest cook in creation, a solid mass of hunchedly embracing couples was slowly revolving. The tinkly and near-drowned musical accompaniment for this elephantine exercise came from behind a mob of people at the far end of the wall to the right, which was lined with shallow booths.

Like tiny volcanos in the midst of a general earthquake, all the figures were spewing words and cigarette smoke.

Two couples marched straight at Carr. He swung aside, lightly bumping a waiter who was coming around the end of the bar, with a tray of cocktails. The waiter checked himself while the couples passed and Carr deftly grabbed two of the cocktails just as another couple came between them. He turned to present one of the cocktails to Jane. But she had already left him and was edging through the press along the booths. Carr downed one of the cocktails, put the empty glass in his pocket and followed her, sipping at the other. But as soon as he reached the first booth, he stopped to stare.

Marcia was sitting opposite a handsome young man with stupid eyes and not much of a chin. He sported white tie and tails. Marcia was wearing her silver lame, a dress with two fantastic founces and a plunging neckline.

"Still, you tell me you've had a lot of dates with him," the

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young man was saying artlessly.

"I always have lots of dates, Kirby," Marcia replied sparkingly.

"But this . . . er . . . what's his name . . . Carr chap . . ." Kirby began.

"I sometimes go slumming," was Marcia's explanation.

Carr planked his elbow on their table and put his chin in his hand. "Pardon this intrusion from the underworld," he said loudly.

They didn't look at him. "Slumming can be amusing," Kirby observed.

"It can," Marcia agreed brightly, "for a while."

"And this . . . er . . ."

"The name's Carr Mackay," Carr said helpfull.

". . . er . . . Carr chap . . ."

"Believe me, Kirby, I've always had lots of dates," Marcia repeated. "I always will have lots of dates."

"But not so many with one man," Kirby objected.

"Why not?" she asked, giving him the eye, which seemed to put a new gleam in Kirby's. "How about starting tonight?" he asked.

"Dating?" Marcia said blankly. "Darling, we are."

"I mean at my place," Kirby explained. "You'd like it there."

"Would I?" Marcia asked mystically.

Carr reached his hand toward her, a gloating smile on his lips. Then suddenly he grimaced with self-disgust, drew back his hand, and turned his back on them.

Chapter XV

Love doesn't make the world go round, but it sure puts a spark of life in the big engine . . .

There had been quite a change in Goldie's while Carr's back was turned. The dancers had all squeezed themselves into hitherto imperceptible nooks and crannies around the tables. The mob had dispersed to reveal a grossly fat man whose paunch abutted the keyboard of a tiny, cream colored piano. A short apish individual who looked all dazzling white shirt-front—Goldie, surely, at last—was standing on the edge of the empty dance floor and saying in a loud harsh voice that would have been very suitable for a carp: "And now, let's give the little chick a great big ovation."

Half the audience applauded violently. Goldie ducking down from the platform, rewarded them with a cold sneer. The fat man's hands began to scuttle up and down the keyboard. And a blonde in a small black dress stepped up on the platform. She held in one hand something that might have been a shabby muff.

But even as the applause

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swelled, most of the figures at the tables were still jabbering at each other.

Carr shivered. Here it is, he thought suddenly—the bare stage, the robot audience, the ritual of the machine. Not a bacchanal, but a booze-fest to the music of a mindless Pan who'd gone all to watery flesh and been hitting the dope for two thousand years. The dreadful rhythm of progress without purpose, of movement without mind.

The blonde raised her arm and the muff unfolded to show, capping her unseen hand, a small face of painted wood that was at once foolish, frightened, and lecherous. Two diminutive hands flapped beside it. The blonde began to hum to the music.

Continuing to toy with the piano, the fat man glanced around briefly. In a tittering voice he confided, "And now you shall hear the sad tale of that unfortunate creature, Peter Puppet."

Carr shivered, finished his second drink in a gulp, looked around for Jane, couldn't see her.

"Peter was a perfect puppet, the fat man explained leisurely, accompanying himself with suitable runs and chords. "Yes. Peter was the prize Pinnochio of them all. He was carved out of wood to resemble a human being in complete detail, oh the most complete detail."

The puppet made eyes at the blonde. She ignored him and began to dance sketchily.

The fat man whirled on the tables, beetling his brows. "But he had one fault!" he half shrieked. "He wanted to be alive!" Again Carr shivered.

Going back to the lazy titter, the fat man remakred, "Yes, our Peter wanted to be a man. He wanted to do everything a man does."

Some guffaws came through the general jabber. The fat man's hands darted venomously along the keyboard, eliciting dreamy, pastoral tones.

"Then one lovely spring day while Peter was wandering through the meadows, wishing to be a man, he chanced to see a beautiful, a simply un-believably, be-yutiful be-londe. Peter . . . ah, Peter felt a swelling in his little wooden . . . heart."

With all sorts of handclasps and hopeful gawkings, the puppet was laying siege to the blonde. She closed her eyes, smiled, shook her head, went on humming.

Carr saw Jane picking her way through the tables toward the platform. He tried to catch her eye, but she didn't look his way.

". . . and so Peter decided to follow the blonde home." The fat man made footsteps in an upper octave. "Pink-pink-pink went his little wooden tootsies."

Jane reached the platform and,

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to Carr's amazement, stepped up on it. Carr started forward, but the packed tables balked him.

The blonde was making trotting motions with the puppet and the fat man was saying, "Peter found that the blonde lived right next door to a furniture factory. Now Peter had no love for furniture factories, because he once very narrowly escaped becoming part of a Sheraton table leg. The screaming of the saw and the pounding of the hammers . . ." (He did buzzy chromatic runs and anvil-chorusings) ". . . terrified Peter. He felt that each nail was being driven right into his little wooden midriff!"

Jane was standing near the blonde. Carr at last caught her eye. He motioned her to come down, but she only smiled at him wickedly. Slowly she undid the gilt buttons of her coat and let it drop to the floor.

"Finally conquering his terror, Peter raced past the furniture factory and darted up the walk to the blonde's home . . . pink-pink-pink-pink-pink!"

Jane had cooly begun to unbutton her white blouse. Blushing, Carr tried to push forward, motioning urgently. He started to shout at her, but just then he remembered that the world is a machine and looked around.

The crowd wasn't reacting. It was chattering as loudly as ever.

"Peter followed the blonde up the stairs. He felt the sap running madly through him."

Jane dropped her blouse, was in her slip and skirt. Carr stood with his knee pushed against a table, swaying slightly.

"Peter's throat was dry as sawdust with excitement." The fat man's hands tore up and down the piano. "The blonde turned around and saw him and said, 'Little wooden man, what now?'"

Jane looked at Carr and let her slip drop. Tears stung Carr's eyes. Her breasts seemed far more beautiful than flesh should be.

And then there was, not a reaction on the part of the crowd, but the ghost of one. A momentary silence fell on Goldie's Casablanca. Even the fat man's glib phrases slackened and faded, like a phonograph record running down. His pudgy hands hung between chords. While the frozen gestures and expressions of the people at the tables all hinted at words halted on the brink of utterance. And it seemed to Carr, as he stared at Jane, that heads and eyes turned toward the platform, but only sluggishly and with difficulty, as if, dead, they felt a faint, fleeting ripple of life.

And although his mind was hazy with liquor, Carr knew that Jane was showing herself to him alone, that the robot audience were like cattle who turn to look toward a sound, experience some brief sluggish glow of conscious-

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ness, and go back to their mindless cud-chewing.

Then all at once the crowd was jabbering again, the fat man was tittering, the blonde was fighting off a madly amorous puppet, and Jane was hurrying between the tables, her arms pressed to her sides to hold up her slip, with snatched-up coat trailing from one hand. As she approached, it seemed to Carr that everything else was melting into her, becoming unimportant.

When she'd squeezed past the last table, he grabbed her hand. They didn't say anything. Their eyes took care of that. He helped her into her coat. As they hurried up the stairs and out the glass door, they heard the fat man's recitation die away like the chugging of a black greasy engine.

It was five blocks to Carr's room. The streets were empty. A stiff breeze from the lake had blown the smoke from the sky and the stars glittered down into the trenches between the buildings. The darkness that clung to the brick walls and besieged the street lamps seemed to Carr to be compounded of excitement and terror and desire in a mixture beyond analysis. He and Jane hurried on, holding hands.

The hall was dark. He let himself in quietly and they tiptoed up the stairs. Inside his room, he pulled down the shades, switched on the light. A blurred Jane was standing by the door, taking off her coat. For a moment Carr was afraid that he had drunk too much. Then she smiled and her image cleared and he knew he wasn't too drunk. He almost cried as he put his arms around her.

. . . Afterwards he found himself realizing that he had never felt so delightfully sober in his life. From where he lay he could see Jane in the mirror. She'd put on his dressing gown and was mixing drinks for them.

"Here," she said, handing him a glass. "To us."

"To us." They clinked glasses and drank. She sat down and looked at him.

"Hello, darling," he said

"Hello."

"Feeling all right?" he asked.

"Wonderful."

"Everything is going to be all right," he told her.

"Sure."

"But it really is, Jane," he insisted. "Eventually we'll awaken other people, people who won't go rotten. We'll find a way of taking care of Hackman and the others. You'll be able to go back to your place in the pattern. That'll give you a base of operations. I'll be able to go back too. And say—" (he suddenly smiled) "—do you realize what that will mean?"

"What?"

"It means that I'll have a date with you Saturday night, a date

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in the pattern. I've already met you through Tom Elvested and made a date with you. I first thought he was crazy when he introduced me to a Jane Gregg who wasn't there. But, don't you see, you were supposed to be there. That was your place in the pattern. Our paths are drawing closer together. We won't have to go outside the pattern to be together."

She smiled at him fondly. The telephone rang. Carr answered it. The voice was Marcia's. She sounded rather drunk.

"'Lo, Carr, I though you should be the first person to hear the news of my engagement to Kirby Fisher."

Carr didn't say anything.

"No, really, dear," Marcia went on after a moment. "We're announcing it together. He's right beside me."

Still Carr said nothing.

"Come here, Kirby," Marcia called. There was a pause. Then, over the phone, came the smack of a kiss. "Do you believe it now, Carr?" she asked and laughed a little.

"Sorry, but that's life, darling," she said a few seconds later. Another pause. "You had your chance." Still another pause. "No, I won't tell you that. I wouldn't be interested in your making a scene now." A final pause. "Well, then you'll just have to suffer." Click of the receiver. Carr put his down.

"Who was it?" Jane asked.

"Just a doll jilting me," he told her, moving toward her.

The world seemed to narrow in like the iris diaphragm of a camera, until it showed only her soft smiling face.

Chapter XVI

When some guys wake up, they don't know whether to be decent or mean. They just teeter in the middle. Eventually they fall off, mostly on the mean side . . .

Carr had sleepy memories of the phone ringing, of Jane's voice, of her reassuring touch, of returning darkness. Then came dreams, very bad ones, that seemed to last an eternity. And when, under the spur of an obscure but pressing fear, he fought himself awake, it was as if a legion of demons were opposing his efforts.

The room was dim and swimming, it throbbed with his head, and when he tried to move he found himself weak as a baby. There was a sharp increase in his fear. Fumbling at the sheets, he managed to worm his way to the edge of the bed and roll out. He hardly felt the floor strike him, but the swift movement swirled the air around him and brought him an explanation of

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his suffocating feeling of fear.

He smelled gas.

The nearest window looked miles away and seemed to recede as he crawled toward it. When he finally got his chin on the sill, he found it shut. Inching his way upward, leaning against the glass, he got his paper-feeble fingers under the handles, heaved it up, and sprawled out head and shoulders across the sill, sucking the cold clean wind until he'd been sick and his strength began to return.

Then he remembered Jane.

Returning twice to the window for air, he managed to search the apartment, though his head was still splitting. On the first trip he turned off the gas hissing softly from the ancient wall-fixture and after the third he flung up the other window. A small Chicago gale soon cleaned out the stink.

Jane wasn't there.

He doused his face with cold water and prepared to think, but just then he heard footsteps in the hall. He stayed inside the bathroom door. The lock grated and the door opened softly and in stepped the small dark man with glasses. His left hand covered his mouth and pinched his nostrils shut. His right was returning a bristling key-ring to his pocket. He moved toward the gas fixture. Then Carr lunged toward him.

At the touch of Carr's fingers, the small dark man seemed to shrivel inside his clothes and he instantly bleated, "Please, please, don't! I'll do anything you say!"

Then, peering back fearfully, he recognized Carr and part of his terror seemed to leave him. But his voice was almost catlike as he continued wildly, "I'll confess! Only don't hurt me. I did try to murder you, but now I'm glad you're alive."

Carr shook him. "Where's Jane?" he demanded.

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. What have you done with her?"

"I don't know where she is, I tell you. Oh, please don't hurt me any more. I knew she came here with you last night, because I followed you here from the nightclub. I went off and got drunk again. Then I came back this morning to have it out with you. I let myself into your room with my master keys—"

"And you weren't planning murder?" Carr interjected sardoncially.

"No, no," the small dark man assured him, his eyes going wide, "It's just that I don't like to trouble people. I found only you in bed. I was drunk. My anger that she'd favored you got the better of me. For a moment I hated you terribly and so I turned on the gas and left. But my conscience bothered me and so I hurried back . . ."

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"Hours later," Carr finished thumbing at the window. "It's almost night now. No. I'll tell you why you came back to turn off the gas. Because you knew that if you didn't, no one else in the world would—and your kind is careful to tidy up after you."

The small dark man looked up at him fearfully. "You know about things then?" he quavered. "She's told you?"

"About everything," Carr answered grimly.

The small dark man caught at his sleeves. "Oh, then you'll understand how lonely I am," he said piteously. "You'll understand how much Jane meant to me. You'll sympathize with me."

"I'll beat you to a pulp if you don't tell me everything you know, quickly. About Hackman, Wilson, Dris—everything."

"Oh please," the small dark man implored, his gaze darting wildly around the room. Then a new spasm of terror seemed to grip him, for he began to shake pitiably. "I'll tell you, I swear I will, he whined, "Only it's so cold."

With an exclamation of contempt Carr went and slammed down the windows. When he turned back the small dark man had moved a few steps away from the gas fixture. But he stopped instantly.

"Go ahead," Carr said sharply.

"The whole story?"

Carr nodded. "Everything that's important. Everything that might help me find Jane."

"All right," the small dark man said. "I think you'll understand me better then." And he paused and his eyes went dead and his face seemed to sink in a trifle, as if something behind it had gone far away. His voice too seemed to come from a distance as he said, "It was Hackman who wakened me and took me out of the pattern. It happened in New York. Actually I'd been awake most of my life, but I hadn't realized that other people weren't. Hackman lifted me out of a grubby little life and pampered me like a pet monkey and satisfied my every whim, and for a while I gloried in my power and puffed myself up as a little prince, with Wilson my king and Hackman my queen. But then—" (he hesitated) "—it began to get too much for me. It wasn't that I got tired of living in millionaires' homes while they weren't. Or that I got bored with spying on the secretest details of people's lives and sitting in on the most private conferences of great industrialists and statesmen—though the high and mighty lose their glamor fast when you catch on to the pattern, and the world-shaking incidents become trivial when you know they're conducted by puppets and that one event means no

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more than another. No, it was the vicious little impertinences and the outright cruelties that began to sicken me. I don't mean the dead girls—they were rather lovely, in a heartbreaking sort of way, though Hackman was always jealous and was careful to see I never went with them while I was alone. I mean the business of always slapping people when you were sure you couldn't be watched, and doing obscene things to them. And slipping plates of food out from under people's forks and watching them eat air. And watching the puppets write love letters and scrawling obscene comments on them. And that night Hackman got drunk and went down Broadway half undressing the prettier girls and . . ." (he winced) ". . .sticking pins in them. Meaningless perhaps, but horrible, like a child throwing pepper in the eyes of a doll." His voice trailed off to a whisper. "Though there was that child they dropped in the octopus tank at the aquarium—I really think she was awake. I got so I hated it all. At that time Hackman wakened Dris and put me in second place, though she and Wilson wouldn't let me try to awaken a girl of my own. And then I met the four men with black hats."

He shivered again. "Please," he said, "I'm still very cold. Could I have a little drink?"

Carr fetched a bottle from the drawer. When he turned around the small dark man had moved again, though again he stopped instantly. He greedily drank the whiskey Carr poured him. Then he shuddered and closed his eyes.

"The four men with black hats were much worse." he said softly. "Strangling's the mildest use to which they put those black silk scarves they wear. They know how to waken others a little—enough to make them seem to feel pain. And they know how to paralyze people—to turn them off. I spotted them at work one day in a playground. That's how I caught on to them. I didn't tell Hackman and the others about them, because things were getting much worse between us. She'd taken to setting the hound to watch me and to seize me if I made a move, and then going away for hours with Dris and Wilson. They laughed at me and called me a coward. So I led them out one day and betrayed them to the four men with black hats, knowing that gangs like that would trade a million dead victims for one really live one.

"But my plan didn't work. There was a fight and the four men with black hats didn't quite manage to turn the trick, and Hackman and the others escaped. I fled, knowing that now both gangs would be hunting me, for the four men in black hats

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thought I'd put the finger on them.

"I fled to Chicago, but Hackman and the others followed me. The hound knows my scent although I try to disguise it. I kept away from them and tried to make a life for myself. I fell in love with Jane, but when I had half awakened her I was scared to go further. Then . . ."

The small dark man suddenly stopped dead. He was standing in front of the mantelpiece. He looked at the door. "Listen!" he whispered agitatedly. "What's that?"

Carr looked back from the door fast enough to see the small dark man whirling back around and stuffing his hand into his pocket. He grabbed the small man's wrist and jerked the hand out and saw that it held a paper. The small dark man glared at him fearfully, but wouldn't let go, so he slapped the hand hard. A crumpled paper fell from it. Carr picked it up, and while the small man cringed, sucking his fingers, Carr read the note the small dark man had tried to snatch from the mantlepiece undetected.

Darling,

Don't be angry with me. I'm going out for a while, but when I come back all our problems may be solved. My friend just called me—thank goodness the phones are dial here—and told me he's discovered a very important secret, something that will give us complete protection from Hackman and Wilson and Dris. I'm to meet him early in the evening. I'm leaving now, because I have certain preparations to make—and it's best that you don't come. I should be back by midnight, with wonderful news!

Lovingly,

Jane

Carr grabbed the small dark man by the throat and shook him until his glasses fell off and he blinked up at Carr in purblind terror, pawing ineffectually at the choking hands.

"The truth!" Carr snarled. "Every bit of it!" And he stopped shaking him and slacked his grip a little.

For a moment only spittle and throaty babble came out of the small dark man's mouth. All at once he began to talk breathlessly and very rapidly.

"They made me do it, I swear! Hackman and the others caught me late last night when I was drunk, and they told me that if I didn't tell them where Jane was they'd give me to the hound. When I hesitated they forced me out onto the Boulevard. Hackman and the hound on one side of the street. Wilson and Dris on

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the other, and made me stay there, dodging the cars, until I'd promised. Even so I lied and told them I didn't know Jane's address, only a phone number she'd given me, and that it might scare her off if I asked her to meet me earlier than this evening. See, I did everything I dared to delay things! They made me phone her and told me what to tell her and listened while I made the date. Then they left me in an empty apartment with the hound guarding me, but he likes to snap things out of the air, so I tossed him sleeping pills until he went under. Then I hurried here to warn Jane, but she'd already gone. I didn't notice the note then, I was too frightened. And because I knew that with Jane gone you'd be happier dead, I turned on the gas. And now if you're going to kill me, please don't hurt me!"

"I can't promise that," Carr said, tightening his grip a little. "Where were you to meet?"

"On the corner of State and Harrison."

"Why Skid Row?"

"That's where they told me to tell her. That's where they have their fun these days."

"And when?" Carr demanded.

"At eight o'clock tonight."

Carr looked at the clock. It was seven-forty. He pushed the small dark man aside and began to throw on his clothes.

"Don't hurt me when you kill me," the small dark man begged with covered eyes from where he'd fallen across the bed. "Let me cut my wrists under warm water."

"Give me the keys to your roadster," Carr said, pulling on his shoes.

The small dark man sprang across the room, fell on his knees in front of Carr, and held out a small leather key-case. Carr took it.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"Parked right out in front," the small dark man told him. "Only now it's a maroon roadster. I wrecked the other last night when they caught me. "You're not going to kill me?"

Carr caught up his coat and went out, shouldered into it while he was hurrying down the stairs. But fast as he went, he found when he got to the bottom that the small dark man was just behind him—and had found time to pick up the whiskey bottle on the way.

"You're going after Jane," he said talking between swigs. "Don't. You haven't a chance. You don't realize their power and cunning, all the most horrible tricks of history passed down from wakened mind to mind since the days of Borgias and the Caesars. You don't know all the traps they're holding in reserve. Wait. Listen to me. There's an

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easier way, a safer way, a surer way . . ."

At the front door Carr whirled on him. "Don't follow me!" He ordered, grabbing the small dark man by the coat. "And remember, if you haven't told me the strictest truth, you'll wish the four men with black hats had got you!"

Chapter XVII

If the mean guys spot you walking around alive, you'd better think fast, brother . . .

Carr had never sweat so driving. It wasn't that the Loop traffic was thick, but the knowledge that there was no place for the roadster in the pattern. If he stopped, the auto behind him might keep on coming. He couldn't let himself get in any lines of vehicles. Mostly he drove on the wrong side of the street.

Finally he came to a place where the signs glared over low doorways, where their chief message was always "Girls and More Girls!" where dance music sobbed and moaned with dead passion, where only shabby and bleary-eyed automaton-men slouched through the dirty shadows. He passed State and Harrison twice without catching sight of Jane. The second time he parked the roadster in a no-parking stretch of curb just short of the black veil of the railway yards and left it with the motor running, hoping it wouldn't be hit. Then he started back, walking slowly.

He passed a tiny theater fronted by huge, grainy photographs of women in brassieres and pants painted bright orange. A sign screamed: TWENTY NEW GIRLS!

He passed a ragged old drunk sitting on the curb and muttering, "Kill 'em. That's what I'd do. Kill 'em."

He passed a slot-like store that said: TATTOOING, then a jumbled window overhung by three dingy gilt balls.

He passed a woman. Her face was shadowed by an awning, but he could see the shoulder-length blonde hair, the glossy black dress tight over hips and thighs, and the long bare legs.

He passed a sign that read: IDENTIFICATION PHOTOS AT ALL HOURS. He passed a black-windowed bar that said: CONTINUOUS ENTERTAINMENT.

He stopped.

He turned around.

No, it couldn't be, he thought. This one's hair is blonde, and the hips swing commonly in the tight black dress.

But if you disregarded those two things . . .

Jane had shown him a blonde wig at the library.

She had written about making "preparations."

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The walk could be assumed.

Just then his glance flickered beyond the shoulder-brushing blonde hair.

A long black convertible drew up to the curb, parking the wrong way. Out of it stepped the handless man.

On the other side of the street, just opposite the girl in black, stood Hackman. She was wearing a green sports suit and hat. She glanced quickly both ways, then started across.

Halfway between Carr and the girl in black, Wilson stepped out of a dark doorway.

Carr felt his heart being squeezed. This was the finish, he thought, the kill. The final blow.

Unless . . .

The three pursuers closed in slowly, confidently. The girl in black didn't turn or stop, but she seemed to slow down just a trifle.

. . . unless something happened to convince them that he and Jane were automatons like the rest.

The three figures continued to close in. Hackman was smiling.

Carr wet his lips and whistled twice, with an appreciative chromatic descent at the end of each blast.

The girl in black turned around. He saw Jane's white face, framed by the ridiculous hair.

"Hello, kid," he called, saluting her with a wave of his fingers.

"Hello," she replied. Her heavily lipsticked mouth smiled. She still swayed a little as she waited for him.

Passing Wilson, Carr reached her a moment before the others did. He did not look at them, but he could sense them closing in behind, forming a dark semicircle.

"Doing anything tonight?" he asked Jane.

Her chin described a little movement, not quite a nod. She studied him up and down. "Maybe."

"They're faking!" Hackman's whisper seemed to detach itself from her lips and glide toward his ear like an insect.

"I'm not so sure," he heard Wilson whisper in reply. "Might be an ordinary pickup."

Cold prickles rose on Carr's scalp. But he remembered to ask Jane, "That 'maybe' you're thinking of doing—how about us doing it together?"

She seemed to complete a calculation. "Sure," she said, looking up at him with a suddenly unambiguous smile.

"Pickup!" Hackman's whisper was scornful. "I never saw anything so amateurish. It's like a highschool play."

Carr slid his arm around Jane's, took her hand. He turned and started back toward the roadster. The others moved back to let them through, but then he could hear their footsteps behind them keeping pace.

"But it's obviously the girl!"

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Hackman's whisper was a trifle louder. "She's just bleached her hair and is trying to pass for a street walker."

As if she feared Carr might turn, Janes hand tightened spasmodically on his.

"You can't be sure," Wilson replied. "Lots of people look alike. We've been fooled before, and we've got to be careful with those others around. What do you say, Dris?"

I'm pretty sure it's the girl."

Carr felt the whispers falling around them like the folds of a si iderweb. He said loudly to Jane, "You look swell, kid."

"You don't look so bad yourself," she replied.

Carr shifted his arm around her waist, brushing her hips as he did. The maroon roadster still seemed miles away. Fringing his field of vision to either side were blurred bobbing segments of Wilson's panama hat and pinstriped paunch and Hackman's green gabardine skirt and nyloned legs.

"Pretty sure, Dris?" Wilson asked doubtfully. "Well, in that case—"

Hackman leapt at the opportunity. "Let me test them," she urged.

Through the skimpy dress Carr felt Jane shaking.

"Put that away!" Wilson whispered sharply.

"I won't!" Hackman replied.

A bleary-eyed man in a faded blue shirt lurched up onto the curb and came weaving across the sidewalk. Carr steered Jane out of his way.

"Disgusting," Jane said.

"I'd have taken a crack at him if he'd bumped you," Carr boasted.

"Oh, he's drunk," Jane said.

"I'd have taken a crack at him anyway," Carr asserted, but he was no longer looking at her. They had almost reached the roadster.

"Come on, kid," Carr said suddenly, stepping ahead and pulling Jane after him. "Here's where we start to travel fast."

"Oh swell," breathed Jane, her eyes going wide as she saw the chugging roadster.

"They're getting away," Hackman almost wailed. "You've got to let me test them."

Carr swiftly reached for the door.

"It might be better . . ." came Dris's voice.

Carr held the door for Jane. From the corner of his eye he saw Hackman's hand. In it was one of the stiff, daggerlike pins from her hat.

"Well . . ." Wilson began. Then, in an altogether different voice, tense with agitation and surprise, "No! Look! Across the street, half a block behind us! Quick, you fools, we've got to get out of here."

Carr ran around the roadster,

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jumped in, and pulled away from the curb. He started to give it the gun, but Jane touched his hand. "Not fast," she warned. "We're still playing a part."

He risked a quick look back. Hackman, Wilson, and Dris were piling into the black convertible. On the other side of the street, drawn together into a peering knot were the four men with black hats.

That was all he had time for. He swung the roadster slowly around the next corner, squeezing it by a high walled truck that spilled trickles of coal dust.

They hadn't gone a half block when they heard a souped-up motor roar past the intersection behind them without turning. Another half block and they heard another roar behind them that likewise passed on. They slumped with relief.

"Where'll we go?" Carr asked. "There's a lot to talk about, but I can't stand much more of this driving."

Jane said, "There's one place they don't know about, where we can hide out perfectly. The old Beddoes house. There are things I've never told you about it."

Carr said, "Right. On the way I'll tell you what happened to me."

Chapter XVIII

Maybe some day the whole engine'll wake. Maybe some day the meanness'll be washed, or burned, out of us. And maybe not . . .

The ornately-carved nine-foot door was of golden oak grimed with the years and it was bordered, Carr noticed, with a ridged blackness that once had been a rainbow frame of stained glass. It scuffed complainingly across the humped-up rug, as the gate had across gravel. He followed Jane inside and pushed it shut behind them.

"I still don't like leaving the roadster thaty way," he said.

"We didn't want it too near here," she told him.

"But it's such a big thing to have displaced in the pattern."

She shrugged. "It was probably a display model, if I know my . . . friend. And I think the big machine has an automatic way of correcting large displacements like that. But look."

The circle of her flashlight's beam traveled over walls cobwebbed with soot, picked up here and there dull glints of a figured gold paper and huge pale rectangles where pictures had once hung. It jumped to two shapeless bulks of sheet-covered chairs, hesitated at a similarly shrouded chandelier looming overhead, finally came to rest on a curving stairway with a keg-thick newel post carved in the form of a stern

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angel with folded wings. Jane took Carr's hand and led him toward it.

"What do you know about John Claire Beddoes?" she asked him.

"Just the usual stuff," Carr replied. "Fabulously wealthy. Typical Victorian patriarch, but with vague hints of vice. Something about a mistress he somehow kept here in spite of his wife."

Jane nodded. "That's all I knew when I first came here."

The musty odor with a hint of water-rot grew stronger. Even their cautious footsteps raised from the tattered but heavily padded stair carpet puffs of dust which mounted like ghostly heads into the flashlight's beam.

"In spite of everything he did to us," Carr said, "I almost hate leaving your friend like that."

"He can't go on betraying poeple for ever," Jane said simply. "One of the reasons I brought you here is that he doesn't know about this place."

They reached the second-story landing and a door that was a mere eight feet hight. It opened quietly when Jane pushed it. "I've oiled things a bit," she explained to Carr.

Inside the flashlight revealed a long dark-papered room with heavy black molding ornamented with a series of grooves that were long and very deeply cut, especially those in a picture rail that circled the room a foot from the ceiling. Round about were old-fashioned bureaus and chests and other furniture so ponderous that Carr felt it would take dynamite to budge them. While at the far end of the room and dominating it was a huge grim bed with dark posts almost as thick as the angel downstairs.

"Behold the unutterably respectiable marital couch of the Beddoes," Jane proclaimed with a hint of poetry and laughter. Then she entered one of the alcoves flanking the head of the bed, laid the flashlight on the floor, and fumbled at the wide baseboard until she'd found what she was looking for. Then, still crouching there, she turned to a mystified Carr a face that, half illuminated by the flashlight's beam, was lively with mischief.

"To get the biggest kick out of this," she said, "you must imagine John Beddoes waiting until his wife was snoring delicately and then quietly getting up in his long white nightgown and tasseled nightcap—remember he had a big black beard—and majestically striding over here barefooted and . . . doing this."

With the words, Jane rose, not letting go of the baseboard. A section of the wall rose with her, making a dark rectangular doorway. She picked up the flashlight and waved Carr on with it.

"Enter the secret temple of delight," she said.

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Carr followed her through the dark doorway. She immediately turned around, lowered the secret panel behind them, and switched off the flashlight.

"Stand still for a moment," she said.

He heard her moving around beside him and fumbling with something. Then came the scratch of a match, a whiff of burning kerosene, and the next moment a gold-bellied, crystal chiminied lamp at his elbow was shedding its warm light on scarlet walls and scarcely tarnished gilt woodwork.

"The place is so sealed up," Jane explained, "that there's hardly any dust, even after all these years. There's some sort of ventilation system, but I've never figured it out."

The room that Carr found himself looking at with wonder was furnished with lurid opulence. There were two gilt cupboards and a long side-board covered with silver dining ware, including silver casseroles with spirit lamps and crystal decanters with silver wine-tags hanging around their necks. Some of the silver was inset with gold. Toward the end of the room away from the secret panel was a fragile-looking tea-cart and an S-shaped love seat finished in gilt and scarlet plush. The whole room was quite narrow and rather less than half the length of the bedroom.

Jane took up the lamp and moved beyond the love seat. "You haven't seen anything yet," she assured Carr with a smile. Then kneeling by the far wall she drew up a narrow section which disappeared smoothly behind the gilt molding overhead.

"They're counterweighted," she explained to Carr and then stepped through the opening she had revealed. "Don't trip," she called back. "It's two steps up."

He followed her into a second room that was also windowless and about the same shape as the first and that continued the same scheme of decoration, except that here the furnishings were a gilt wardrobe, a littered gilt vanity table with a huge mirror in a filagreed gilt frame suspended on scarlet ropes with golden tassels, and a bed with a golden canopy and a scarlet plush coverlet. Jane pulled off her blonde wig and tossed it there.

"And now," she said, turning, "let me introduce you to the girl herself." And she lifted the lamp so that it illumined a large oval portrait avove the wardrobe. It showed the head and shoulders of a dark-haired and rather tragic-eyed girl who seemed hardly more than seventeen. She was wearing a filmy negligee.

"She looks rather pale," Carr observed after a few moments.

"She should," Jane said softly. "They say he kept her here for ten years, though that may have

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been just an exaggeration."

Carr walked on and looked through the archway in which the room ended. It led to a bathroom with gold, or gilded fixtures, including an ancient four-legged tub whose sides, fluted like a seashell, rose almost to shoulder height and were approached by little steps.

"Go on, look in," Jane told Carr as he hesitated in front of it. "There's no slim skeleton inside, I'm happy to report.

Before returning, Carr noted that all the fixtures were, though old-fashioned, so shaped that the water would swirl in and out silently.

Jane was fumbling with a gilt molding that ran along the wall at eye level. Suddenly it swung out and down along its length and hung there on hinges, revealing a black slit in the wall that ran the length of the room and was about an inch wide.

"It opens into one of the grooves in the picture molding in the Beddoes bedroom," Jane explained. "Our being two steps higher makes the difference. If there were a light in there and we turned out our light, we'd have a good view of the place. I suppose John Claire used it to make sure his wife was asleep before he returned. And his young friend could have used it to spy on her lover and his lawful mate, if she were so minded.'

Suddenly the cruel and barren possessiveness of the place and the terrible loneliness of the machinations of these long-dead puppets caught at Carr's heart. He put his arm around Jane and swung her away from the black slit.

"We'll never leave each other, never," he whispered to her passionately.

"Never," she breathed.

They looked at themselves curiously in the mirror they now faced. Their images peered back at them through a speckling of tarnish. With an uneasy laugh Carr went up to the vanity table and on an impulse pulled open the shallow center drawer.

There lay before him a small, single-barreled pistol, pearl-handled, gold chased. He picked it up and looked at the verdigreed rim of the lone cartridge.

"All the appurtenances of a romantic *fin de siecle* glade of pleasure," he observed lightly. "Apparently never used it, though. I wonder if it was supposed to have been for herself or him, or the wife. The powder's as dead as they are, I'll bet."

Jane came to his side and pointed out to him, amid the jumble of objects on the vanity, two blank-paged notebooks bound in red morocco and two heavy gold automatic pencils with thick leads. Most of the pages in each notebook had been torn out.

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"I imagine they used those to talk together," she commented. "He probably had a strict rule that she must never utter a single word or make a single sound." She paused and added uncomfortably, "You're bound to think of them as having been alive, aren't you, even when you know they were just robots."

Carr nodded. "No music . . ." he murmured, fingering through the other objects on the vanity. "Here's one way she passed the time, though." And he pointed to some drawing paper and sticks of pastel chalk. A yellow one lay apart from the others Jane flicked it back among the rest with a shudder.

"What's the matter?" Carr asked.

"Something my friend told me," she said uncomfortably. "That Hackman and Wilson and Dris use yellow chalk to mark places they want to remember. Something like tramps' signs. Their special mark is a cross with dots between the arms."

Carr felt himself begin to tremble. "Jane," he said, putting his arm around her. "On one of the pillars of the gate in front of this place, above a ledge too high for you to see over, I saw such a mark."

At that moment they heard a faint and muffled baying.

Jane whirled out of his arms, ran and lowered the panel between the rooms, came back and blew out the lamp. They stood clinging together in the darkness, their eyes near the long slit.

They heard a padding and a scratching and a panting that gradually grew louder. Then footsteps and muttered words. A snarl that was instantly cut off. Then a light began to bob through the bedroom doorway. It grew brighter, until they could see almost all of the bedroom through the crack with its tangled edging of dust and lint.

"Watch out," they heard Wilson call warningly from beyond the door. "They may try something."

"I only hope they do," they heard Hackman reply happily. "Oh how I hope they do!"

And then through the bedroom door the hound came snuffing. It was larger even that Carr had imagined, larger than any Great Dane or Newfoundland he'd ever seen, and its jaws were bigger, and its eyes burned like red coals in its short, ash-colored hair. He felt Jane shaking in his arms.

Hackman walked at its side, her eyes searching the room, bending a little, holding it on a short leash. There was sticking plaster on her cheek where Gigolo had scratched her.

"Don't hurry, Daisy," she reproved sweetly. "There'll be lots of time."

Wilson and Dris entered behind

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her, carrying gasoline lanterns that glared whitely. Wilson put his down near the door. Dris, hurrying, stumbled into him with a curse.

Meanwhile Hackman and the hound had gone almost out of sight in the alcove. Suddenly she cried out, "Daisy, you stupid dog! What are you up to?"

Wilson, about to rebuke Dris, turned hurriedly. "Don't let him hurt the girl!" he cried anxiously. "The girl's mine."

"That's where you're wrong, you fat-bellied has been!" Dris snarled suddely. "I've played second fiddle to you long enough. This time the girl's mine." And he hurried past Wilson with his light. Wilson grew purple-faced with rage and tugged at something in his pocket.

"Stop it, both of you!" Hackman had returned a few steps, the hound beside her. They both did. Hackman looked back and forth between them. "There'll be no more ridiculous quarreling," she told them. "The girl's mine, isn't she, Daisy?" And she patted the hound, without taking her eyes off them. After a few seconds Wilson's face began to lose its unnatural color and Dris' taught frame relaxed. "That's good," Hackman commented. "It's much the simplest way. And you won't lose your fun. I promise you you'll find it quite enjoyable. Now come on back, Daisy. I think I understand what you were trying to show me." Once again she went almost out of sight, Wilson following her and Dris carrying the lamp.

"Where is it now?" Carr and Jane heard Hackman ask. There came a sound of eager scratching and snuffing. "Oh yes, I think I get it now. Let's see, one of these circles in the baseboard should press in and give me a fingerhold. Yess . . . yes. Now if I pressed them both together . . ."

Jane and Carr suddenly heard the voices coming more plainly through the wall between the hidden room than from the bedroom. And the next moment they heard the hound snuffing and scratching at the second secret panel.

"Another one, is there?" they heard Hackman say. "Well, it won't take long." Then she raised her voice in a shout. "Yoohoo, in there! Are you enjoying this?"

Carr took the single-shot pistol from his pocket. Its fifty-year old cartridge was a miserable hope, though their only one.

But just then there came a new sound—the sound of footsteps, on the stairs, growing louder, louder, louder. Dris, who, judging from the position of the light, had stayed in the alcove doorway, must have heard it too, for he called out something to the others.

"Stay there!" Hackman hissed at the hound. "Watch!"

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Then the three of them ran back into the bedroom, just as there sprinted into it the small dark man with glasses, his flying feet raising a puff of dust at each step.

He was past them before he could stop. Wilson and Dris circled in behind him, cutting off his retreat. Panting, he looked around from fact to stonily-glaring face. Suddenly he laughed wildly.

"You're dead!" he squealed at them shrilly. "You're all dead!"

"This is a long-anticipated entertainment, darling," Hackman told him. She looked beautiful as she smiled. Then the three of them began to close in.

The satisfaction in the small dark man's expression was suddenly veiled by terror. He started to back away toward the alcove. "You called me a coward," he screamed at them wildly. "But I'm not. I've killed you, do you hear, I've killed you."

But he continued to back away as the others closed in.

"Run rabbit!" Hackman cried at him suddenly, and they darted forward. The small dark man whirled around and darted into the alcove. "Now, Daisy!" Hackman shrieked. There was a terrible snarl from the panel, and a thud, and a threshing sound and series of long high screams of agony. In between the screams Carr and Jane could hear Hackman yelling. "Oh, that's lovely, lovely! Get out of my way Dris, I can't see. That's it, Daisy! Beautiful, beautiful. Hold up the light, Dris. Oh good, good dog!"

Carr struggled half-heartedly to get to the panel, but Jane held on to him. Then suddenly the screams stopped and a few moments later the bubbling gasps stopped too, and through the slit they could see Hackman march back into the bedroom in a state of high excitement.

"That's the most wonderful thing that's happened to me in months," she exclaimed, striding up and down. "Only it was much too quick. I could have watched forever." She managed to get a cigarette alight with shaking fingers and puffed it furiously.

The hound came slinking out after her and muzzled her ankles. Red splotches appeared on her stockings.

"Oh get away, you filthy, lovely beast!" she rebuked him affectionately. "Go and watch like I told you." He slunk back into the alcove. Presently Jane and Carr could hear his low breathing just beyond the second panel.

Wilson and Dris, the latter carrying his gasoline lamp, had followed Hackman into the bedroom. They seemed rather less impressed with the whole affair.

"I wonder what he meant when he said he'd killed us?" Dris asked frowningly.

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"Mere hysteria and bluff," Wilson assured him. "Typical cornered rat behavior." He smiled. "Well, that was just hunter's luck. Now for the real fun."

"Precisely," agreed a flat, cruel voice.

Hackman, Wilson and Dris all looked at the bedroom doorway. In it stood a pale young man wearing a black topcoat and black snap-brim hat.

"This gives me great pleasure," he said and whipping a black silk scarf from around his neck he ran at hackman. Three near counterparts poured into the room at his heels. There was the scuff of darting footsteps, the jolt and thud of tumbling bodies, the whistle of effortful breaths.

"I can't bear to watch it, I can't," Jane whispered, shrinking against Carr. But she watched it nevertheless.

One of the black hats ran past the melee to the alcove. Carr and Jane heard four sharp reports, and a little later got a whiff of gunsmoke. The gunman quickly returned from the alcove, but his companions were winning their battle, though not without difficulty.

"I can't bear it," Jane repeated, but still she didn't close her eyes.

Soon it was quiet in the bedroom. The first of the black hats looked around rapidly, taking stock, as he tucked his scarf back inside his coat. "Roberto," he demanded, "was it quite necessary to kill her?"

"I'll say," the man replied. "She almost got my eye with that pin of hers."

The first of the black hats next addressed himself to the man who had run to the alcove, "Giovanni," he said, "you should not have used the gun."

"I thought it wise at the time," Giovanni asserted. "Though as it turned out he made no move at me. He just lay there and took it."

The first of the black hats chuckled. "All bark and no bite, eh? That's the way with most of them. Next time be wiser. Well, are we ready? No need to tidy up in a place like this."

"Shall we search further?" Roberto asked.

The first of the black hats shook his head. "No," he said, "that was all of them, and we're late as it is. Come on, now. Two of you bring the lanterns." In the doorway he turned. "Small dark chap," he said, "we are grateful." And he kissed his fingers and departed.

Carr and Jane heard the footsteps recede down the stairs, fainly heard the slam of a door, and a little later the roar of a souped-up motor. They clung together for perhaps ten minutes in shaking silence. Then Carr broke away and lit the lamp.

Jane hid her face from the

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light with her hands and threw herself down on the scarlet coverlet.

"I can't bear it," she sobbed. "Wilson's face . . . and Dris's head bent back that way . . . and what they did to Hackman . . . and before that the hound—I tell you, I'll go crazy!"

"Come on, dear," Carr urged anxiously, "We've got to get out of here."

"I couldn't go through that room," she cried wildly. "I couldn't bear to look at them. I'd lose my mind!"

Carr waited until her sobs had grown less hysterical. Then he said to her, "But don't you see what it means, dear? Everyone that knows you were awakened and out of the pattern is dead. The men with black hats don't know about either of us. We can go back to our own lives, and Saturday we're going to meet naturally in the pattern. We'll be together and safe and sure of our place and then we can slowly begin to waken others—people without the selfishness and cruelty of the little gangs."

Her sobbing ceased. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Maybe there are more wakened people than we realize," he said. People like we were, who have wakened without realizing that others are still asleep. People capable of love and sacrifice."

He looked at her. She lifted herself up a little. "Sacrifice," he repeated, "like your friend proved himself capable of. He must have led the men with black hats here deliberately, don't you see? Just as he must have led them to South State Street. He must have known that the others were planning to trap us here, he must have thought that he'd be wiped out whatever happened, but that we might be saved." He paused. "Maybe it came out of a bottle again, but just the same it was courage."

Jane sat up straight. "I'm ready," she said.

Carr knelt to work the panel, but he couldn't get the trick of it, immediately. "Let me," Jane said, and in a moment had slid it up. Taking the lamp, she started through ahead of him, averting her face from the pitiful form of the small dark man lying beside the love seat.

But Carr, peering over her shoulder as she went down the steps, did look at it—and found himself puzzled.

The mangled throat was hideous, to be sure, but in the otherwise unmarked face and forehead above it were what looked like a couple of neat bullet holes.

He seemed to hear Giovanni say again, "He just lay there and took it."

The lights had all been in the bedroom. In the shadows here

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Giovanni hadn't noticed that the small dark man was already dead. Naturally.

But in that case—

Soundlessly the hound rose from behind the loveseat and launched its gray bulk at Jane's throat.

Carr whipped his hand over Jane's shoulder. There was a flash, and a crack and a puff of smoke.

The hound's jaws snapped together six inches from Jane's throat and it fell dead.

Carr caught Jane as she collapsed back against him. He steadied the lamp.

He looked down at the pearl-handled pistol in his hand.

"The powder was still good," he said . . .

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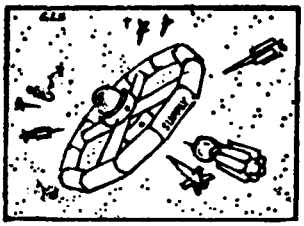

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